10¢

TEXAS RANGERS

JUNE

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

LONE STAR DOOM

A COMPLETE FULL-LENGTH NOVEL FEATURING THE WEST'S MOST FAMOUS OUTLAW-HUNTERS IN ACTION

By JACKSON COLE

BEST ACTION WESTERN STORIES

I'M GETTING $150.00 A MONTH

Amazing New Sickness And Accident Policy Costs Only 3¢ a Day

BIG PROTECTION VALUE OFFERED BY ONE OF BEST KNOWN COMPANIES IN AMERICA

More than a million people are killed or injured every year by automobile accidents alone. Thousands of others are forced to lose time and money through sickness and accidents, which strike you down without warning. BE PREPARED FOR THESE EMERGENCIES!

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This policy covers and pays graded benefits for all sicknesses common to both men and women, whether house confined or not, and all accidents, both big and small, that happen every day in every way. Benefits payable from FIRST DAY of disability, as provided. *It does not skip the first 7 or 14 days as many policies do.* It also pays generous benefits for loss of limbs or sight—PROTECTION FOR YOUR LOVED ONES in case of accidental death—and many other liberal benefits as you will see when you examine your policy.

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The Sterling Insurance Company is a legal reserve Stock Company, and is legally authorized to do business by mail in every state of the Union. Over 100,000 men and women now enjoy Sterling protection. Over $750,000.00 has already been promptly paid in cash benefits and more is being paid every day. When you insure with Sterling, you insure with confidence. As a policyholder of the Sterling Insurance Company you are NOT subject to the payment of dues or assessments. THE SMALL PREMIUM THAT YOU PAY ALWAYS REMAINS THE SAME.

STERLING INSURANCE COMPANY

For Only 3c a Day

This Policy Pays Up To

$100.00
Monthly for Sickness or Accident Disability

$150.00
Monthly if Confined to a Hospital

$2500.00
for Loss of Limbs or Sight

$2500.00
for Accidental Death

Pays Moderate Doctor's Fee
for any Non-Disabling Injuries

MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY THIS OFFER IS LIMITED!

Direct Mail Plan Saves You Money

Because we deal direct by mail and have no collectors, or expensive branch offices to maintain, we can pass tremendous savings on to you. The Sterling Sickness and Accident Policy gives you the MOST PROTECTION FOR LEAST MONEY. It is one of the most outstanding Insurance Bargains in America.

EASY TO OWN

The cost of the Sterling Sickness and Accident Policy is so amazingly low that you will never miss the small sum. Just think of it! This liberal protection costs only 3 pennies a day and you can pay for it on easy monthly payments.

FREE INSPECTION of Policy

SEND NO MONEY! Here's our sensational offer. Fill out and mail the coupon below and we will mail you the actual policy for FREE INSPECTION. You may examine it yourself in the quiet of your home and see for yourself just what liberal benefits this Sterling Policy offers. No obligation whatever. Send for this policy today.

EXAMINE THIS POLICY FREE

STERLING INSURANCE COMPANY
5643 Jackson-Franklin Bldg., Chicago, Ill.

Please mail me at once for FREE INSPECTION your New Improved 3-Penny-A-Day Sickness and Accident Policy. I am not obligated. No agent will call.

Name.....

Street Address.....

City.....State.....

Name of Beneficiary

OVER 100,000 SATISFIED POLICYHOLDERS NOW ENJOY STERLING PROTECTION

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Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

Still, wouldn't it be worth your while to sacrifice some of your leisure in favor of interesting home study—over a comparatively brief period in your life? Always provided that the rewards were good—a salary of $2,000 to $10,000?

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Just suppose you were permitted to work in a large accounting house under the personal supervision of an expert accountant. Suppose, with his aid, you studied accounting principles and solved problems day by day—easy ones at first—then the more difficult ones. If you could do this—and if you could turn to him for advice as the problems became complex—soon you'd master them all.

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You cover accountancy from the basic Principles right up through Accountancy Systems and Income Tax Procedure. Then you add C. P. A. Training and prepare for the C. P. A. examinations.

As you go along, you absorb the principles of Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Statistical Control, Organization, Management and Finance.

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Will recognition come? The only answer, as you know, is that success *does* come to the man who is really *trained.* It's possible your employers will notice your improvement in a very few weeks or months. Indeed, many LaSalle graduates have paid for their training—with increased earnings—before they have completed it! For accountants, who are trained in organization and management, are the executives of the future.

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For your own good, don't put off investigation of *all* the facts. Write for our free 48-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays." It'll prove that accountancy offers brilliant futures to those who aren't afraid of serious home study. Send us the coupon *now.*

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TEXAS RANGERS

Vol. 12, No. 3 June, 1941 Price 10c

FEATURING JIM HATFIELD, RANGER
IN
A Full Book-Length Novel

LONE STAR DOOM
By JACKSON COLE

The Lone Wolf Rides into the Big Bend Country to Battle Against a Heritage of Greed that Erupts in a Volcano of Strife! Bloodshed and Violence Call for the Ready Guns and Keen Strategy of Ranger Hatfield - - - - - - - - - 14

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

YES- I'M CONVINCED THAT I CAN MAKE GOOD MONEY IN RADIO. I'M GOING TO START TRAINING FOR RADIO RIGHT NOW.
NO- NOT ME. I'M NOT GOING TO WASTE MY TIME. SUCCESS IS JUST A MATTER OF LUCK AND I WASN'T BORN LUCKY.

BILL SAID "YES" HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY IN RADIO NOW
THIS N.R.I. TRAINING IS GREAT. AND THEY SENT REAL RADIO PARTS TO HELP ME LEARN QUICKLY
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.
I'VE BEEN STUDYING RADIO ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND I'M ALREADY MAKING GOOD MONEY IN MY SPARE TIME
THANKS
OH BILL! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW AND A REAL FUTURE. THANKS TO N.R.I. TRAINING
TOM SAID "NO" HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"
BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE -- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO
GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE
YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM, UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

I will Train You at Home in Spare Time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. SMITH, President
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Established 25 Years

Trained Radio Technicians make good money and you don't have to give up your present job or leave home to learn Radio. I train you at home nights in your spare time.

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Radio broadcasting stations employ operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, servicemen in good pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, Police, Aviation, Commercial Radio, Loudspeaker Systems, Electronic Devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N. R. I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

DRAFT REGISTRANTS!

Hundreds of men who know Radio when they enter military service are going to win specialist ratings in the Army, Navy and Marine Corps. These ratings pay up to 6 times a private's or seaman's base pay, in addition to carrying extra rank and prestige! Whether you enlist or wait for conscription—IT'S SMART TO LEARN RADIO—NOW!

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The day you enroll, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets—start showing you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your Course I send plans and directions which have helped many make $5 to $10 a week in spare time while learning. I send special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. YOU ALSO GET A MODERN PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT.

Find Out What Radio and Television Offer You

Act Today! Mail the coupon for my 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my Course in Radio and Television; shows more than 100 letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President
Dept. 1FO9
National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1FO9
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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Age.....

Name .....

Address .....

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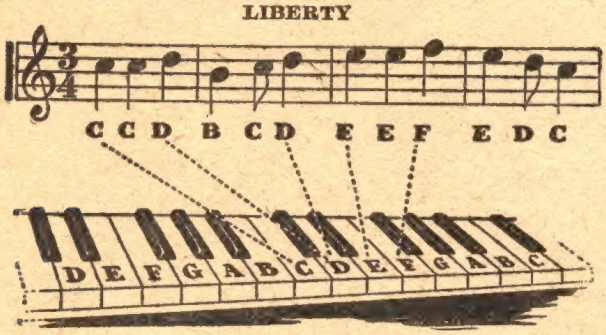

Play the melody of AMERICA right now and see how easy it is!

COURSE IS WONDERFUL

I have desired to tell you how wonderful my Course is and what pleasure it brings. I appreciate the way the lessons are written—so filled with understanding. * *F. B. Arena, Wis.*

PLAYS ON RADIO

I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio station. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful Course. * *W. H. S., Alabama*

* *Actual students' names on request Pictures by Professional Models*

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PROVE to yourself how easy it is to learn music this streamlined way. Follow the diagram above and strike the notes indicated on the piano. You'll be playing that stirring song "America." Simple, isn't it?

With this remarkable method you can learn to play your favorite instrument for LESS THAN SEVEN CENTS A DAY! That includes everything . . . sheet music, advisory service, etc. No teacher to pay—no extras, and you learn faster than you ever thought possible.

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With this amazing U. S. School of Music invention thousands learn music right at home, in spare time, and without hard work required by old-fashioned methods. You learn to play by playing real tunes right from the start. It's actually fun. That's one reason why over 700,000 people have enrolled for U. S. School courses.

This new method of teaching music is sound and practical. Your lessons come to you in clear, Print and Picture form. When you want to take up a particular tune, you first read the printed instructions that *tell* you how to play it. Then the big diagrams and pictures *show* you every move to make. Finally you play it yourself and *hear* how it sounds. Everything is made so easy-to-understand you can't go wrong.

Send For Print and Picture Sample

If you want to learn to play your favorite instrument quickly, with little expense, and in a way that makes learning a delightful pastime—send for our Free illustrated Booklet and Print and Picture Sample *today*. They fully explain this up-to-date method. But don't wait. Fill in and mail the coupon, checking the instrument you want to learn, NOW. Instruments supplied if needed, cash or credit. U. S. School of Music, 2946 Brunswick Bldg., New York City. 43rd year (Est. 1898)

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I am interested in music study, particularly in the instrument indicated below. Please send me your free illustrated booklet, "How to Learn Music at Home," and your illustrated Print and Picture Sample. (Do you have instrument?.....)

Piano	Saxophone	Cornet
Violin	Trumpet	Piano Accordion
Guitar	Trombone	Plain Accordion
Cello	Banjo	Hawaiian Guitar
Mandolin	Ukulele	Other Instrument

Name .....

Street .....

City .....State.....

☐ Check here if under 16 years of age.

If You Had Only 10 Days to Live

SUPPOSE doctors said you had only ten *days* more to live! What would you give for another ten YEARS of gloriously healthy life? "Anything in the world," you say. But, unfortunately, it would then be too late. NOW, while you still have many more years to live, is the time to fortify yourself against later troubles.

Are *you* getting "paunchy"—worried about constipation, short-wind, nervousness, tiredness? Or are you underweight, anaemic—always getting colds, headaches? Here are some interesting facts it will pay you to read:

Charles Atlas

An untouched photo of Charles Atlas, winner of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

Constipation Is One of the World's Plagues

Constipation is so common today that many people do not realize its serious results. Suppose the sewers of a city were clogged, did not drain out daily. Disease and death would break out everywhere! That begins to happen in your system when you are constipated.

But Constipation caused by lack of proper exercise can be overcome. It is the result of carelessness—many of us simply let our bodies "go to seed." First we begin to notice "a little heaviness around the waist." We do nothing about it. Suddenly we find we are FAT! Just carelessness! Then we may begin to get nervous. Short-winded. Pepless. Begin to look old, feel old. Yet are NOT old in years! Even our hair gets lifeless, caked with dandruff. It starts to fall out and—another shock!—DOES NOT COME BACK IN!

Only 15 Minutes a Day—See Results in Even 7 Days!

I have helped thousands of men (of all ages and in all parts of the world) WIN OUT over conditions like these. Men write me, saying: "You have made a New Man of me!"

My method helps to tone up your entire system—and to give exercise and life to those little-used muscles that begin to shrivel up and atrophy. I do not believe in weights, springs, or other such methods. My system of **Dynamic Tension** is natural, and may easily be applied right in the privacy of **your own home!**

CHARLES ATLAS

Holder of Title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" Author of "Everlasting Health and Strength"

of which 1,500,000 copies have been distributed!

Charles Atlas, once a sickly 97-lb. weakling, is today known as the world's outstanding physical instructor. Read a few of the letters received from grateful clients.

"Used to feel tired, run down. Could never eat a good meal, get a good night's sleep. Now I sleep like a log, feel like a new person. I was never before in such good condition and am glad I took your advice."—C. H., Staten Island, N. Y.

"You have done more for me in one month than others, at 10 times the cost, did in one year. Today at 51, I feel younger than at 31."—P. A., Chicago.

"Have more pep, and, after having had constipation for many years, I find it gone."—L. C. C., Phila.

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FREE 48-PAGE BOOK

Some of those I have helped were run-down, nervous, constipated. They report that they got rid of their "bay windows"—and now feel new vigor flowing through their systems. They feel that they have added years to their lives.

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Name .....
(Please write or print plainly)

Address .....

City .....State.....

don't Worry about Rupture

● Why put up with days . . . months . . . YEARS of discomfort, worry and fear? Learn now about this perfected invention for all forms of reducible rupture. Surely you keenly desire—you eagerly CRAVE to enjoy life's normal activities and pleasures once again. To work . . . to play . . . to live . . . to love . . . with the haunting Fear of Rupture banished from your thoughts! Literally *thousands* of rupture sufferers *have* entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained.* Why not you? Some wise man said, "Nothing is impossible in this world"—and it is true, for where others fail is where we have had our greatest success in many cases! Even doctors—thousands of them—have ordered for themselves and their patients. Unless your case is absolutely hopeless, *do not despair.* The coupon below brings our Free Rupture Book in plain envelope. Send the coupon now.

Patented AIR-CUSHION Support Gives Nature a Chance to CLOSE the OPENING

Think of it! Here's a surprising yet simple-acting invention that permits Nature to close the opening—that holds the rupture securely but gently, day and night, at work and at play! Thousands of grateful letters express heartfelt thanks for results beyond the expectation of the writers. What is this invention—How does it work? Will it help me? Get the complete, fascinating facts on the Brooks Automatic Air Cushion Appliance—send now for *free* Rupture Book.

Cheap—Sanitary—Comfortable

Rich or poor—ANYONE can afford to buy this remarkable, LOW-PRICED rupture invention! But look out for imitations and counterfeits. The Genuine Brooks Air-Cushion Truss is never sold in stores or by agents. Your Brooks is made up, after your order is received, to fit your particular case. You buy direct at the low "maker-to-user" price. The perfected Brooks is sanitary, lightweight, inconspicuous. Has no hard pads to gouge painfully into the flesh, no stiff, punishing springs, no metal girdle to rust or corrode. It brings heavenly comfort and security—while the Automatic Air Cushion continually works, in its own, unique way, *to help Nature get results!* Learn what this patented invention can mean to you—send coupon quick!

C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

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Without obligation, please send your FREE Book on Rupture, Proof of Results, and TRIAL OFFER—all in plain envelope.

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Street.....

City..... *State*.....

State whether for Man ☐ *Woman* ☐ *or Child* ☐

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I not only offer you an opportunity to get a practical "Learn by doing" training to prepare you for a good-pay job—but I make it easy for you to get this training.

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In the Big Coyne Shops you have individual help by expert instructors so that you quickly and easily learn Electricity by actual work. No advanced education or previous electrical experience is needed. You are taught . . . **not by correspondence, not by books or embarrassing reciting** . . . but by the Famous Coyne **"Learn-By-Doing"** training method which has helped hundreds of successful graduates to get and hold the job they like, or go into business for themselves.

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and many others

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READ WHAT THESE GRADUATES SAY

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I think the "pay after graduation" plan . . . offers the fellow who wants to get ahead in life a wonderful opportunity . . . I am now employed by the —— Power Co. I have been employed by this Company ever since graduating from COYNE . . . I make almost double what I did at my previous work . . . COYNE School helped me in landing the job I now have.

James Dible

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GET THE FACTS

Don't let lack of money keep you from sending in the Coupon now. My Big FREE Book is full of facts and photographs which tell you about Coyne Training. It also gives you the details of my Pay After Graduation Plan, Spare Time Employment Offer, Graduate Employment Service, Lifetime Scholarship and other advantages.

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No Books No Classes

No dull books, no baffling charts, no classes, you get individual training . . . all real actual work . . . building real batteries . . . winding real armatures, operating real motors, dynamos and generators, wiring houses, etc., etc.

This modern fireproof building is occupied entirely by the Coyne Electrical School.

EXTRA 4 WEEKS COURSE IN RADIO INCLUDED

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Address.....

City.....*State*.....

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500 S. Paulina St., Dept. A1-84, Chicago, Ill.

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New York, N. Y.

Please send me my Solar Horoscope, in accordance with my zodiacal birth period. I am enclosing 15c in stamps or coin which includes mailing and handling. I was born

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BASED ON THE SUN'S POSITION AT YOUR BIRTH

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One of the most valuable aids to self-understanding is the Solar Horoscope. It explains you to yourself and shows you the true significance of the latent forces in your nature.

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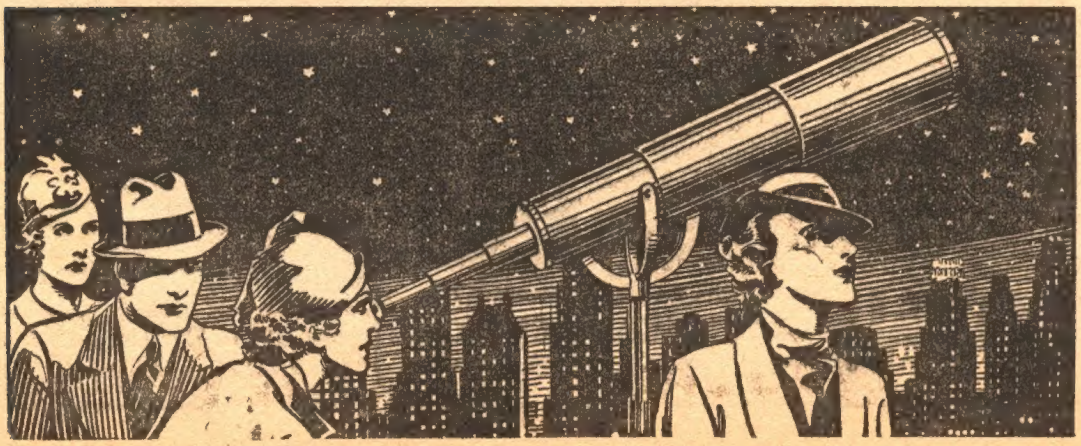

WHAT MYSTERIOUS POWER LIES WITHIN THIS RING?

YOUR SEARCH HAS ENDED!

THE SECRET AT LAST REVEALED!

POWER! MONEY! SUCCESS! LOVE! HEALTH! HAPPINESS! For countless generations, man has sought all these things but *only to a few* have all of them been given! The Ancients believed that *all* of them could be acquired by every man and woman if the *Key to the Universal Truth* could be found.

Even today there are people who believe that they have found this Key to Power and claim that the secret lies in the use of MYRRH as proven by their own successes.

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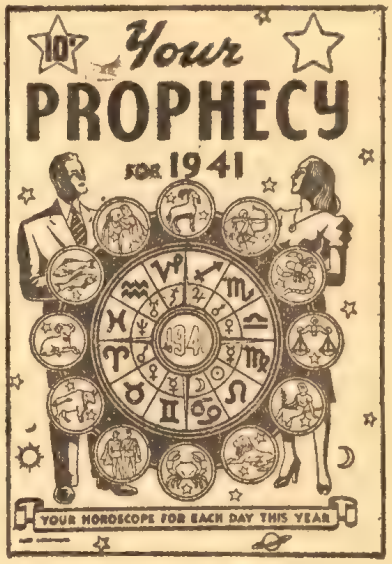

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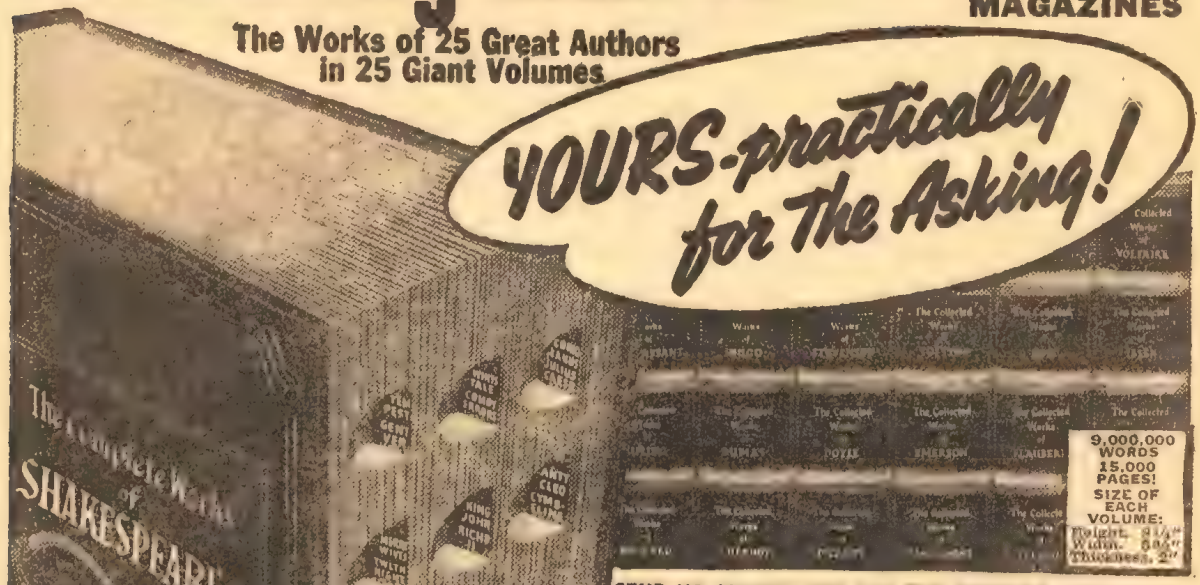

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Hatfield whisked the old man from under the whizzing knife (CHAPTER VI)

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CHAPTER I

Trail to the South

OLD WIRT SLAVEN glowered from under grizzled brows at the swollen carcasses of what had been a score of prime promising beef creatures.

"This settles it!" he growled. "We're trailin' outa this blamed country of freezin' cussedness!" It was not the first batch of dead cattle old Wirt had glowered at in the course of the day's ride over his broad acres, nor the second, nor the third. The blizzard just passed had taken heavy toll. Just as had the blizzards of the preceding winter.

"Yeah," he repeated, scowling ferociously at the dead steers, "I've plumb had enough. We're trailin' jest so soon as the weather clears up."

"Where to?" asked taciturn "Lank" Williams, his foreman.

"South," growled old Wirt. "South, where it don't get so dadblamed cold in winter yore words freeze as they come outa yore mouth and yuh hafta thaw 'em out 'fore t'other feller

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knows what yuh said last winter."

"Where to, south?" persisted the literal-as-to-detail Williams.

Old Wirt scowled even more ferociously than before, yanked his mustache, cuffed his broad-brimmed "J. B." lower over one truculent eye, rumbled deep in his throat. Then his craggy countenance cleared as a sudden thought struck him.

"Section I ambled through once three years ago come next summer," he boomed triumphantly. "The Big Bend country!"

Lank Williams hauled out a plug of "eatin' tobacco," worried off a hunk and chewed meditatively before commenting. He sprayed the frozen tail of a dead steer eight feet and four inches distant with a stream of amber juice, cocked one sandy eyebrow higher than the other and spoke.

"I've heard tell some of that there section. Mighty little water, mighty lotta desert. Ain't rained 'nough there the past twenty years to drown a jackass rabbit. Might as well have steers fruz as get so dry they turn to dust and blow away. Steers don't do well without grass, and grass needs water."

OLD WIRT did not like to have anyone put up an argument with him. He blew through his nose like a burro in a cactus patch.

"Water there if yuh know where to look for it," he declared. "Plenty good rangeland, and m i g h t y few steers to run on it. Country shore ain't crowded."

"What's the sense in raisin' steers if yuh can't get 'em to market?" Lank asked frantically.

"Yuh can get 'em to market from the place I'm thinkin' about," old Wirt said with positiveness. "There's a way through the hills that hits smack into a railroad town where they's shippin' pens. And they's a place not so terrible far off where the Rio Grande can be forded. Yuh can drive steers into Mexico and a good market thataway, and they ain't no inspectors. Easy from the place I'm thinkin' about."

"Didn't know yuh was thinkin' about any particular place," Lank remarked laconically.

"Well, I am. I see the place, and figgered at that time what a whoppin' fine place it'd be for a spread. Wasn't figgerin' on movin' then, though, so didn't pay it over much mind. It's a big wide canyon, most a valley, with plenty grass and plenty water."

"Huh! Why the blazes ain't somebody done grabbed it up before now then, seein' as it's such a whoppin' fine section?"

Old Wirt grunted. "Ain't nobody much hangs out in that section except Mexicans and ignorant fellers, and they won't go anyways nigh that canyon. They 'low it to be haunted."

"What kinda haunts?"

"I dunno." Old Wirt shrugged. "'Pears there's some kinda tall tale about some old priest fellers that built a mission there way back in the days when Spanish jiggers like Coronado was traipsin' across Texas. The Injuns or somebody murdered all of 'em, but 'fore they cashed in, they put a cuss on the section. Folks there believe the cuss'll settle down on anybody that goes in there."

Lank Williams squinted dubiously at the reddening sunset sky.

"Bad sorta haunts to fool around with," he opined. "Liable to be a almighty bad cuss, too."

Old Wirt snorted through his mustache, and glared at the dead steers.

"Ain't no Spanish cuss any worse'n Panhandle country blizzards," he declared disgustedly. "Come clearin' weather and we're trailin'."

Trail they did, across the Canadian River, past the grim *palo duro* canyons, by Castle Gap where, legend says, Maximilian's treasure is buried. They forded the Pecos, winding and shining between its rainbowed banks, and at last, one late spring day, when the sun was sinking in blood behind the grim western hills that now were called the Ladrones — the Robber Hills—the m o u t h of the canyon loomed before them. Even as it had loomed that evening of the dim dis-

tant past when Don Ricardo de Castro, and Sebastian who was black, and terrible Prince Miguel Telo rode toward it from the murderous desert of the South.

But now no flickering fires of *Infierno* greeted the weary cowboys, the string of lurching covered wagons and the great herd of bawling, disgusted cattle. Only burned and blackened and riven, the mighty walls of the mission house Fray Marcos had builded still stood guard at the can-

JIM HATFIELD

yon mouth, frowning down ominously upon the swift stream that turned so sharply to the east.

Old Wirt Slaven stared doubtfully at the grim ruins that were stained a bloody red by the last rays of the setting sun.

"Reckon this is the place fellers talked about when I was this way afore," he surmised thoughtfully. "Only I didn't see it then. I passed by over to the west and that's a good ten miles from the east wall here."

Lank Williams cocked a dubious eyebrow, considering unhappily.

"Haunts," he mumbled. "Well, she shore looks like it."

"Haunts, yore Aunt Maria!" bawled old Wirt. "Get a camp pitched 'fore it comes on to be dark. We'll look this section over proper in the mornin'."

They looked it over in a morning of green and gold, with the little river flashing like silver under the sun, and the desert an infinity of molten bronze rolling southward to the distant Rio Grande. Old Wirt rubbed his horny hands together with satisfaction.

"This valley's the prize of the pickin's," he declared. "Big enough for two-three spreads. But jest look over there to the east and north. Mile on mile of prime rangeland, and this river provides water for irrigation where it's needed. Lank, this is a find and it's past me to figger why it ain't been occupied long ago."

"I recollect we passed quite a mite of burned spots and busted down

house walls on our way here," Williams pointed out. " 'Pears folks have tried this section out before—and didn't have over much luck with it. Mebbe that cuss on it is still in good workin' order."

"Yuh're loco!" scoffed old Wirt. "They ain't no such things as haunts and cusses. Folks that was here before jest didn't have no get-up-and-get to 'em. Jest like that feller we see near that Mexican 'dobe we passed yesterday—that feller that was settin' there groanin' and cryin', because he was settin' on a cactus spine and was too darned lazy to get up off it.

"I tell you what we'll do, Lank! We'll send up to the Panhandle and tell the Cooleys and the Grants and the Whetsells and the Frazer brothers and Grandpap Wagner about this here section—invite 'em all to pull up stakes and amble down this way. I figger they'll come, too, now that somebody's happened along and sorta broke ground. You start one of the boys off today, and if the fellers up there are a-mind to, they can make it this summer. And now let's amble back and take a look at them ruins up the canyon. I got a notion about them."

They examined the massive walls of the ancient mission. Burned and blackened and weather-beaten, they were still as firm as when the old monks laid down their trowels. The stone-flagged floor was intact and the oaks that Fray Marcos had planted were now succeeded by mighty descendants with widespread branches.

Again old Wirt Slaven rubbed his hands with satisfaction.

"Ranchhouse all set for us," he declared exuberantly. "Puttin' on a roof and fixin' up doors and winders and such won't be no chore a-tall. Them walls is plenty high for buildin' a second-story floor and rooms. We'll clear out all them busted stones and things from this big room and put in a partition or two."

LANK WILLIAMS' lean jaw sagged, his eyes goggled.

"Yuh mean to say yuh're figgerin' on *livin'* in here, with the cuss and the haunts and everything?" he demanded.

"If the haunts don't like it, they can get out," rumbled old Wirt. "Say, what's that set in the rock down there, Lank?"

He stumped over to the far end wall of the ruins, picking his way carefully among the rubble that had once formed the great altar. Before a rusty iron crucifix imbedded in the stone he paused, peering at it from under his bushy brows.

"A cross," he grunted. "A iron cross. Looks like that yarn about this bein' a old mission house might have somethin' to it. Yeah, it's a cross, all right. Bigger, but sorta like one I saw a priest feller carryin' down Chihuahua way, only his wasn't made of iron. Well, let it stay there. Looks fastened right solid anyhow. Come on, Lank, let's have a talk with the boys."

CHAPTER II

The Hill Gods Grin

FOR years without number the section of the Big Bend country which had been named Ghost Valley and shunned because of its sinister associations, had been dominated by the grim canyon men who came later. Since then it had lain dormant, practically untouched by action or event. But now, as if the coming of old Wirt Slaven and his Bar S brand had touched off hidden springs, things began to happen.

Old Wirt built his ranchhouse on the site of the old mission, roofing the walls and constructing floors and partitions. He explored the valley to its head, chuckling with pleasure at the rich growths of needle and wheat grasses and the stands of curly mesquite. The big springs gushing forth from the somber gorge to which the valley narrowed toward its head promised a never-failing water supply, just as the rifts and gulleys and the frequent overhang of the black, basaltic cliffs provided shade and

shelter for the cattle in times of heat or bad weather.

Old Wirt noted that there was some good range beyond the western wall of the canyon, between the valley proper and the grim loom of the Robber Hills, the Ladrones. Here was a rather narrow belt of rolling land that stretched far back along the lower slopes of the hills. Its elevation was considerably higher than that of the valley and the range to the east, and it was not so well watered, but sufficiently so to care for a well stocked range.

"Somebody'll take it, if this part of the country begins to fill up," Lank Williams opined. "It's nearer to the railroad town than any other stretch, but I'd advise the boys, if they come down from the Panhandle, to locate to the east of our spread. That crick ain't never gonna run dry, and it's leveler range, too, more like what they're used to up north. But, Boss, if a town gets itself built, which the chances are it will if the country does fill up, it'll be right where this stretch of hill range comes down toward the desert, here by this trail that runs north from Mexico to the railroad town. She'll be a humdinger, too, yuh can jest bet yore last peso. The gents that hang out in the Ladrones up there, and some that find the climate below the Line sorta healthier than on this side will make it their hang-out when they feel a celebratin' urge comin' on. Yeah, if she does build up, she's shore gonna howl."

Old Wirt agreed, scowling at the bleak Robber Hills fanging up against the sky.

"Uh-huh," he agreed, "and them sorta towns brings trouble. But folks means towns, and yuh gotta have folks if a country is gonna amount to anythin'. Reckon it'll be sorta up to us old-timers here to keep things in line."

"And that means trouble shore," grunted Lank. "I gotta hunch that cuss is gonna turn out to be right spry before the last twine's looped thereabouts."

Old Wirt snorted disdainfully at mention of the curse, and busied himself transforming Ghost Valley into the Bar S Ranch with the old mission house as his *hacienda*.

ALL of which, doubtless, did not please the sardonic hill gods who sat enthroned upon the topmost crags of the Ladrones. Doubtless they resented this intrusion of their privacy and decided to do something about it.

And perhaps it was due to them that an old priest died in Mexico and among his effects was found an ancient volume quaintly written in Spanish of a bygone day, and banded and clasped with beaten gold. It was such a volume as is dear to a collector's heart and would bring a goodly price in the marts of the great cities to the north.

Anyway, so it happened, and in far-off New York a collector of rare books fingered the pages of Brother Ignacio's history of the founding of the Fray Marcos Mission. He read the account, too, translating laboriously but accurately, read with relish this story of adventure in days long past.

And suddenly, as he pondered certain flowery passages as set down by Brother Ignacio, his casual interest quickened to intense concentration. Carefully he checked words and phrases, referring to lexicons and other works on Spanish which his library provided. Far into the night he toiled over the old vellum, writing out in clear and concise English what he learned.

The following morning Wade Hendricks, rare book collector, laid the finished manuscript before another man who sat at a mahogany desk in a spacious office.

"You have always scoffed at my hobby, Watson," he told his business partner. "Always said it was just a waste of time and money. But look what I hit upon by chance. Read that, and then take another look at the report Sanchos sent up from Louisiana."

The other man read, casually at first, then with quickened interest, perusing the translator's explanatory notes with great care. He sat back in

his chair, the morning sunlight streaming over his broad shoulders and setting his face deeply in the shadow.

"Looks like you might have something there, Hendricks," he admitted. "That is if somebody hasn't hit on it already."

"Not likely," Wade Hendricks replied. "That's easy to check on, though."

The man called Watson nodded. "But perhaps somebody already has title there?"

The book collector shrugged. "Somebody else had original title in Louisiana—and didn't want to sell," he remarked with peculiar emphasis.

Watson nodded. "We won't discuss that," he replied. "Well, from all appearances we're washed up in Louisiana and will have to get out. Can't take any chances on anything else there. Might start an investigation, and we don't want that. This is worth looking into, anyhow. You're from down that way originally, I believe?"

HENDRICKS' powerful hands tightened on the desk top.

"You know blamed well I am," he growled. "We won't discuss that, either. Anyway, I've heard something about the particular section mentioned in this work, and it's *some* section. Suppose you check up on everything concerning this matter. If the results are satisfactory I'll arrange for reservations, and get in touch with Sanchos. He's liable to come in handy, again."

"You mean you're going down there yourself, Hendricks?" demanded his partner, with a quick, sharp, inquiring look. "You think it's safe? Considering we wouldn't want the Louisiana crowd to catch on, and considering your rec— Well, considering."

"What's the danger?" argued Hendricks. "The Louisiana crowd knows nothing about me personally. You have always been the front there, remember. What if they do learn that Wade Hendricks, retired business man, book collector, is browsing around in Texas? If anybody thinks about it at all, they'll think I'm looking for more rare volumes, or for antiques or something. They'd never connect me with *this*.

"And as for the other matter—I've changed a lot in fifteen years, in some ways. In others I haven't, which makes me the logical man to go. You're a good man in your way, Watson, but you wouldn't exactly fit into a roaring Border country. If I find use for your peculiar talents, I'll send for you. First thing of all, though, if things check, is to start Sanchos moving."

And upon their craggy thrones amid the Ladrones, the malicious Hill Gods grinned. . . .

In Ghost Valley, things moved swiftly and satisfactorily so far as the establishing of the Bar S was concerned. Weeks passed uneventfully and the boys were putting the finishing touches to the newly roofed ranchhouse. And then Don Nicalosa Gomez arrived.

It was Lank Williams' hawk eye that first noted the dust cloud along the southern skyline.

"Hosses comin'," said Lank. "And, I figger, a sizable herd bein' drove this way, judgin' from the looks of that dust."

Old Wirt, with his cowboys at his back, rode to the mouth of the valley to meet the visitors. Where the fertile land so abruptly ended and the desert began, the tight group of horsemen paused. The cattle, a great many of them, tired and dusty, drank thirstily of the waters of the little river and gratefully cropped the rich grass.

The leader of the new arrivals rode forward. He was tall, broad of shoulder, lean of waist. His skin was not much darker than that of the bronzed Texans, but his raven hair and mobile features bespoke the fiery South and Latin blood. He had coldly expressionless eyes which gazed inscrutably from under drooping lids fringed with heavy black lashes. Even keen-visioned Lank Williams was not sure at first glance as to the color of those disquieting eyes.

"I am Don Nicalosa Gomez," the

As the stranger's gun spoke, the taut rope parted, and the victim fell to the ground (CHAPTER III)

Mexican said abruptly, in a rich, vibrant voice.

Old Wirt nodded. "Name's Slaven," he introduced himself in turn. "Wirt Slaven. Glad to know yuh, Don Nicalosa."

THE Mexican bowed courteous acknowledgment, but his gaze was fixed on the newly roofed mission house, and as he gazed, his face grew dark with disappointment.

"You intend settling here, senor?" he asked, although the thing was fairly obvious.

Old Wirt nodded. "Done settled, I figger it."

Still Don Nicalosa Gomez gazed.

"I had hoped and intended establishing my *hacienda* in this valley," he said. "I was delayed in my plans or I would have been here some weeks before."

"First come, first served, I reckon," replied old Wirt. "I'm filin' with the government, and buyin' to protect my title."

Still the tall Mexican hesitated, seeming to be struggling in his mind to arrive at a decision. He meditated old Wirt and his men, a coldly calculating light in his inscrutable eyes. His followers outnumbered the cowboys more than two to one, but there was that about these bronzed, quiet Texans that would give pause to even the boldest. But still he hesitated.

Old Wirt Slaven was a fearless man, but he was no fool. He realized that the situation was dangerous as a stick of dynamite, and as pregnant with unpredictable possibilities. A wrong move on the part of either side, even a careless word, might set off a disastrous explosion.

Besides, old Wirt was eminently fair, and there was nothing of a dog-in-the-manger about him. He had hoped to have immediate neighbors of his own choosing—men whom he had known and associated with in the Panhandle country. But, after all, he was not certain that his invitation to emigrate would be accepted, and the men who stood before him had their rights and must be dealt with fairly. He pointed to the stream that flowed down the rich and fertile canyon.

"This crick cuts the valley spang in two," he told Don Nicalosa. "I'm located on this side, to the head of the canyon. T'other side is open range, so far as I'm concerned."

CHAPTER III

A Ranger Rides

A LONG moment passed before Don Nicalosa answered. The Texans lounged easily in their saddles, elaborately careless, but ready for instant action. The dark-faced Mexicans in their velvet and silver were equally elaborate in their unconcern, but keyed to the same hair-trigger alertness.

All could see that Don Nicalosa was burning with a disappointment that partook of baffled fury, but none could tell what course the action was shaping behind those cold eyes. Finally, however, he shrugged his broad shoulders in a gesture of resignation, his white teeth flashed in a smile and for an instant the little merry devils of a good loser looked out from under his drooping lids.

"I am disappointed, senor," he said frankly. "I had hoped to build my *hacienda* here, for reasons of—sentiment. But beyond the stream is a fair country also. We will be neighbors, *si?* And, I hope, good neighbors to one another."

With a courtly bow he whirled his splendid black horse and cantered back to the wagons which followed his herd. Soon the outfit moved westward and was lost to sight.

Lank Williams contemplated the course the Mexicans had taken, and chewed meditatively on a grass blade.

"Cuss appears to be in good workin' order after all," commented Lank.

When old Wirt demanded what in all the blue blazes of a here and hereafter he meant, Lank only grinned. . . .

For a time, it appeared that Lank was altogether wrong. The new arrivals made no trouble, and Ghost

Valley prospered. One and all, the ranchers to whom old Wirt had sent word accepted his invitation, and before the green of summer turned to the scarlet and gold of early autumn, they had established themselves in the Big Bend country, the majority of them to the east of Ghost Valley.

The word had gone around about the lush open section, and other cowmen arrived. And as Lank Williams predicted was inevitable, a town mushroomed up — a roaring boom town set on the board shelf that jutted out to the west of Ghost Canyon, where the trail which led to the railroad town cut through the hills.

It is a grim and contradictory land —the Big Bend country of Texas. Here ranching is, and forever will be, undisturbed by the plow. Here is little or nothing to attract the nester, the small farmer, the emigrating home maker. Here land is measured by the section rather than the acre, and "little ranches" are liable to be about the size of a goodly eastern county.

It is a land of outlandish traditions, grim stories, turbulent action. A land of weird superstitions, a land where Indian, Mexican and Texan strove—and still strive—with one another. Much of it is little different from what it was when Cabeza de Vaca wandered across Texas in the days when Cristobal Colon was still spoken of as a contemporary.

HERE, "west of the Pecos," on the arrival of old Wirt Slavens and his friends, there had been little of law other than that which men carried at their sides or on their hips. Here, in the Ladrones, the Chisos—Phantom — Mountains, and other ranges of ominous name and sinister history, lurked men who would dance in a noose did they show their faces in more civilized places. Here grim bands rode the desert and the plains, meting out hard-handed justice of their own devising.

Such a band as this was, in the desert south of the newborn and turbulent cattle town of Saba, crucifying a man on the vicious spines of a cholla cactus a little more than a year after old Wirt Slaven had driven his herd into Ghost Valley, and had built his ranchhouse on the site of the ancient Fray Marcos Mission.

Grimly they went about their work, binding the screaming wretch, preparatory to hoisting him to the crooked arms of the cactus in such a way that, by desperately bowing his body outward, he could keep the spines from his quivering flesh. But when aching muscles could stand no more and were forced to relax, the thorns bit cruelly, forcing the tormented victim from one alternating agony to another.

The hoisting rope tightened as brawny arms put forth their strength. The howling captive went scraping up the stem of the cactus, his yells redoubling in volume as the spines bit and tore.

Crash!

The taut rope abruptly parted, the severed end of the upper portion whipping high into the air, snapping sharply as if in echo to the booming gun report. The bound victim fell to the ground with a thud, where he lay in gulping silence, the breath momentarily knocked out of him. One of the haulers on the rope lost his footing as the strain was so suddenly released and sprawled beside his victim.

So busy had been the band at their grim work that they neither saw nor heard the approach of the magnificent golden sorrel horse that had cantered around a clump of chimney rock a moment before. Now they whirled with startled oaths, to glare at the man who sat lounging carelessly in the saddle and surveying them from a pair of long, thickly lashed eyes that gazed steadily from beneath level black brows.

They were startling and unusual, those long eyes, their color a peculiarly deep shade of green. At the instant they were like the sky that lowers over the gaunt Ladrones at the break of a wintry dawn, and they so held the attention of the tight group about the gasping victim that for the moment they saw nothing else.

Then angry glances began taking

in the man himself. He was as noteworthy as his strange eyes or the splendid horse he forked.

Many inches more than six feet tall, he had shoulders so broad, a chest so deep that at first his height did not strike those staring men as being so great as it was. Lean of waist and hips, long of arm and thigh, he sat his horse with the careless grace acquired through a lifetime spent in the saddle.

HIS face, deeply bronzed, was broad of brow, lean of jaw, with high cheek-bones on either side of a prominent, high-bridged nose. A rather wide mouth, with good-humored grin-quirks at the corners somewhat relieved the grimness of the jutting chin. But there was something about the stern, hawklike profile, even in respose, that would give pause to the boldest and most reckless.

In one slim hand, dangling loosely by his side, was a long-barreled black gun, with a trickle of smoke still wisping from its muzzle. Its twin was snugged in a carefully oiled and worked cut-out holster that hung low from heavy double cartridge belts against the wearer's muscular thigh.

Lazily, the tall rider, who wore the careless but efficient garb of the rangeland in the same way that a plumed knight of old wore blazoned armor, watched the taut group. The man who had fallen still lay on his side, gaping up from the ground. The prisoner of the torturers still retched and gulped. Aside from his intermittent gurgle there was silence, silence pregnant with the threat of dire happenings.

Then a squat, brawny individual, who apparently was the leader of the group, found his voice.

"What the devil yuh think yuh're tryin' to do?" he bawled huskily.

The tall rider's teeth flashed white and even in his bronzed face. But the fleeting grin was much more like that with which a powerful and fearless wolf, sure of his strength, favors a pack of angry prowl-cats than that of a man. There was little of mirth in it, and much of contemptuous amusement.

"Ain't tryin'—done did it," he drawled in a deep musical voice, an eminently fitting voice to come out of that great chest.

The squat man's jaw sagged, he gulped and goggled.

"Why—why—you—you—" he began.

He cringed back with a yelp as the big black gun jutted forward like the slash of a striking rattler.

Crash!

One of the men who had been torturing the victim on the ground yelled shrilly, and fell to the ground himself, threshing about in the dust, gripping a blood-spouting hand. The gun he had stealthily drawn to pull a bead on this tall interloper lay a dozen yards distant, its lock smashed and battered by the tall stranger's bullet.

In the rider's left hand a second gun had appeared. His eyes were utterly cold now, his mouth a hard, straight line. He spoke, and now his voice was like the grind of jagged steel on ice.

"About the kinda fangin' to be expected from any outfit pullin' what you fellers was up to when I rode up. All right, now shuck the ropes offa that poor devil on the ground and let him up. Pronto!"

The squat man spoke, his voice thick with rage.

"Feller, yuh don't know what yuh're a-messin' into! Yuh don't know the straight of things here, and yuh're tanglin' yore rope almighty bad."

"Not half so bad as yuh're gonna tangle yores if yuh don't—*move!*"

THE big guns jutted forward, rock-steady, the yawning sweep of the black muzzles taking in each and every one of the half dozen men grouped beneath the cactus. The hammers clicked back to full cock.

"Hold it, feller," the squat man said quietly. "We'll do what yuh say."

His black rage had cooled, to be replaced by a cold vindictiveness that set the hard lines of his face even

harder. His eyes were bitter and calculating.

"Get the ropes off that blame wide-looper, boys," he told his men. "They ain't no use arguin' with a hellion what's got the drop on us. If them guns wasn't pointed this way—"

Again his words ended in a startled yelp, and again he ducked back, for again the big black guns had moved. This time, with a sharp clicking of lowered hammers, they slid smoothly into the cut-out holsters. The tall rider still lounged lazily in his saddle, but now his supple hands rested lightly on the horn.

"They ain't pointed yore way now, hombre," he observed significantly.

CHAPTER IV

Shooting Place

THE group showed no inclination to accept the implied challenge of the tall rider who lounged lazily in his saddle, watching them. They glanced at the groaning wounded man on the ground, and at the severed rope end dangling from the cactus arm and, with elaborate unconcern, busied themselves with the loosing of the captive. The squat man gazed at the slim, deadly hands resting on the pommel of the high Mexican saddle, shook his head and voiced the general opinion of the others.

"I ain't missin' how them holsters is slung, feller," he said, "and how them gun handles is wore smooth. Us fellers is jest ordinary cowhands, not quick-draw two-gun men. But I'm tellin' yuh, there's other things besides a quick trigger finger, as yuh're liable to find out before this business is finished.

"All right, yuh saddle-colored devil"—he spoke to the victim, who was now free of the cords that bound him—"yuh're loose, but next time mebbe yuh won't have the luck to have one of yore pals hangin' around to snake yuh outa what's comin' to yuh." He turned and glared at the tall rider. "And as for you, big feller—*adios.* We'll be seein' *you!*"

"Look fast when yuh do," the two-gun man drawled carelessly, apparently unmoved by the vicious threat implied by the last words of the squat man. "Look fast and straight the first time when yuh do, because yuh might not have time for two looks."

The cowboys, bleak of face, hauled their wounded companion to his feet and helped him mount. Then they forked their own broncs.

The tall man significantly tapped the butt of the heavy Winchester jutting from the saddle boot under his left thigh.

"This here saddle gun carries a long ways," he remarked as they gathered up their reins, "and I got right good eyes. Better be sorta careful about turnin' around sudden-like for a spell."

Muttered oaths were all the answer he got. The cowboys rode away, stiff of back, eyes to the front, toward where the town of Saba sprawled in the lap of the Robber Hills. Presently a clump of stones hid them from view.

The rider of the sorrel horse turned his attention to their late victim, who was sitting up and trying to rub some circulation back into his numbed arms and legs. The big man speculated him with slightly narrowed green eyes.

The rescued man was a rather unsavory specimen, a shifty-eyed Mexican half-breed, from all appearances, with a thin gash of a mouth splitting his swarthy face from ear to ear. His unusually high cheek-bones and the lank hair straggling over his ratlike forehead bespoke much Indian blood, just as the breadth of his face and the bulging jaws signified that that blood was doubtless Apache. He grimaced up at the tall man, showing snags of yellow teeth.

"What were them fellers gonna string yuh up for?" the rider asked.

"They say me steal-um steer," the half-breed replied in a grunting voice.

"Did yuh?" came the sharp demand.

The half-breed shrugged, still rubbing his scrawny wrists.

"They say I do, so what matter?" he answered.

The tall man speculated him some more.

"Reckon that's right," he unexpectedly agreed. "If fellers figger a thing to be so, lots of times it don't matter whether it is or not, least so far as they're concerned. You belong in this part of the country, feller?"

"Me work for Don Nicalosa Gomez, Cross G ranch," the Mex equivocated once more. "Texas hombres no like Don Nicalosa. No like *vaqueros* who ride for him."

"Evidently," the man on the sorrel agreed dryly. "If what they were

doin' to you is a sample of their feelin's. Who do them fellers work for?"

The half-breed gestured vaguely toward the northwest.

"Bowtie *hacienda* — Juan — John Sanderson. Over *Pueblo* way."

The tall rider nodded. "Saba's the town's name, ain't it?"

"Uh-huh. Bowtie runs up in hills other side Ghost Valley. Then come town. You go there?"

"Sorta aimin' to," the green-eyed man admittted.

The half-breed grunted, struggled to his feet, stumbling a little on his numbed legs, and shambled toward a shaggy piebald mustang that was grazing on a sparse patch of grass beyond the cactus. The piebald bared vicious teeth as the half-breed seized the dangling reins, and got a cuff over the head in reply.

"Make a good pair," the tall man mused as the half-breed struggled into the saddle and turned his dark face in his direction.

"You go Estrada's *cantina*," he called. "Good place drink—eat. Tell um Ramon Estrada you *amigo* to José Carbajal—that me. Ramon Estrada my *amigo*."

He kicked his spurless heels against the mustang's bony sides, waved a dark hand and rode off, heading due north, toward where the mouth of Ghost Valley was already beginning to fill with menacing purple shadows.

The tall horseman thoughtfully watched him go toward the valley.

"His way of thankin' me, I reckon," he mused. "Well, he may have done me a better turn than he knows."

He grinned whimsically, the flash of his white teeth and the up-quirking of the corners of his firm mouth abruptly making his stern face singularly attractive. His green eyes, filled with strange fire, were sunny as he leaned over and rubbed the sorrel's ears.

"Well, Goldy, old-timer," he said, and chuckled, "shore looks like we managed to get in bad with the right folks in a hurry. If that rat-faced jigger ain't a wide-looper and a killer, he shore misses what he was made to look to be, and them cowhands we hauled him away from are shore boilin'. Mebbe they wasn't so far wrong in what they was doin', but there's been too darn much of folks takin' the law into their own hands of late. That don't get a country nowheres.

"I figger that's what's at the bottom of all the trouble over here, chances are. From the reports Cap Bill's been gettin', folks is shore het up over here, but it wouldn't take much of what we saw today to get most anybody het up. If one outfit hands out that kinda law, the outfits they're on the prod against jest naturally hands it back in kind, and that's the makin' of plenty bad trouble.

"That letter from the hombre named Slaven said it seemed like somebody was tryin' to run the decent element outa this whole neck of the woods, but who's decent and who ain't, lotsa times depends on personal

feelin's. Chances are we'll find it's jest a regulation range feud over not much of anything, per usual, and all it'll take is jest a little Ranger authority to straighten things out."

In which deduction, Ranger Jim Hatfield, for once, anyway, was much in the wrong, and it would not be so long before he was convinced of that. . . .

Beyond the narrow strip of rolling rangeland which flanked Ghost Valley's western wall, the hills reared up in a vast towering bulk which, seen from the desert and in the red light of the setting sun, reminded Jim Hatfield of a gigantic crouching lion with one mighty paw stretched forth toward the lip of the desert. It was upon that flat expanse of that extended paw that the Ghost Valley settlers and the men from the western hills had built their town.

It was one whooping town, Hatfield decided, as he rode slowly toward its straggling outskirts. Even here, quite a distance from the lights which were beginning to wink as the blue shadow of the hills deepened into night, he could hear its brawling voice.

There was a clatter of many boots upon the rough board sidewalks, and a muffled chink of horses' irons in the dust of the crooked main street. A whirl and patter of words tumbled upward through the dark, punctuated here and there by the calf-colic bawl of what was intended for song. The rumbling tones of men blended with the higher pitched bleat of women who didn't care who heard what they said and knew that nobody listened to them anyway. The sprightly click of their high heels blended with the solid clumping of cowboy boots and the soft pad of moccasins.

There was a whirring hum of roulette wheels spread in a subdued monotone beneath the cheerful patter of the balls bouncing in the numbered slots. Cards rustled stealthily as dealers shuffled them in supple hands, their faces pallidly waxen above their snowy shirt fronts and black string ties. Dice bounced across the green cloth like spotty-eyed devils, adding their bony rattle to the general discordance. Bottle necks clinked resonantly against glass rims with melodious regularity, to the accompaniment of thirst provoking gurgles.

The whine of fiddles, the strum of guitars and the lilting *tunk* of banjos beat time for the gigantic symphony that was the combined voices of the cattle town. On the dance floors in the numerous saloons the boots thumped more solidly and the high heels tapped with even airier sprightliness, as bewhiskered hillmen tried to look soulful, and their calculating-eyed partners tried to look as if they believed it.

"Payday on the spreads hereabout, shore as shootin'," Hatfield deduced as he rode along the main street.

His eyes were alert for a livery stable where Goldy could put on the nosebag and taste the comforts of a clean stall after days of hill and desert traveling. He found it, down a little side alley, and not far from the main street.

[*Turn page*]

Pepsi-Cola is made only by Pepsi-Cola Company, Long Island City, N. Y. Bottled locally by authorized bottlers.

A peculiar little one-eyed man with arms that reached to the knees of legs so bowed as to resemble a perambulating "O" swung the big door open for the Ranger to ride in, with his tall head bent low to avoid the ceiling beams. The bow-legged little man had eyes only for the magnificent sorrel horse.

"I see one like him once when I was kinda sleepin' and dreamin' when I'd been a-samplin' *tequila* and rattlesnake whiskey mixed, right frequent," the little stable keeper remarked in an awesomely deep and rumbling voice. "Only the cayuse I see in my dreams had wings and could talk. Feller, that's some hoss!"

"He can do most everything *but* talk and fly," Hatfield admitted, swinging down and loosening the cinches. "And when he humps hisself and sifts sand, he don't make out such a bad substitute for flyin'."

"I betcha me yuh're right," the stable keeper conceded, rubbing Goldy's glossy neck with a gnarled hand that looked like a spraddle-boned ham.

CHAPTER V

Saba Town

HATFIELD smiled as the great sorrel thrust a velvet muzzle into the little stableman's palm and nipped daintily at his fingers with gleaming teeth. The small bow-legged fellow swore at Goldy cheerfully, threatening to "slit his neck and shove his laig through it" if he bit.

Goldy blew prodigiously through flaring nostrils and followed him into the stall. The pair evidently understood each other from the start.

"Yeah, I reckon I don't have to worry about not findin' him here when I come lookin' for him," Hatfield remarked with satisfaction.

"Jest two jiggers tried to lift a bronc from my stable since I opened up—jest two," the little man replied.

"Where are they?" Hatfield asked.

"Buryin' ground's up top the Saddleback Hill, to the north of town," the stableman rumbled laconically.

Hatfield smiled again. Further explanations were unnecessary.

"I'm sorta in the market for a place to pound my ear and surround some chuck," he remarked.

"I got a extra room upstairs, alongside the haymow," the stable keeper told him. "I sleep up there, and if yuh're like most cowhands, I figger yuh'll sorta like to be close to yore hoss, yeah? Specially a hoss like this here one."

"Fine!" Hatfield agreed. "Jest what handle do I use to haul yuh up to the trough? Mine's Hatfield, and the first section of it has done got whittled down to Jim."

"Pleased to meetcha, Hatfield." The bow-legged man nodded. "Malarkey is what the sheriff usta holler to Pap at feedin' time. I was handled Algernon Aloysius in the beginnin', but that give most folks a tired feelin' in the jaw, so I'm mostly knowed as Bigboy—Bigboy Malarkey. Now as to a eatin' house for yuh—they's plenty jest around the corner. Take yore pick. They start off bad and get worse."

Hatfield nodded, gave Goldy a final pat, and headed for the door. Before he reached it he turned.

"Feller, yuh know where is a place called Ramon Estrada's *cantina?*" he asked.

"Bigboy" Malarkey gave him a startled look, opened his mouth, evidently thought better of his first impulse, and closed it again.

"Uh-huh," he said at length. "Head straight up the main street, around the corner, and stop at the place yuh hear the shootin'. It'll have Estrada's name on the winder."

Hatfield looked at Malarkey thoughtfully.

"What's wrong with Estrada's place?" he asked.

Bigboy hesitated, then countered with a question of his own.

"How come you to know Ramon Estrada?"

"Don't know him," Hatfield replied. "Feller I met out in the desert men-

tioned his place kinda favorable."

"Did he mention any rattlesnake dens or hyderphobia skunk hangouts?" Bigboy inquired dryly.

HIS snapping little black eye measured Hatfield, and he rubbed the bridge of his nose with one gnomelike hand.

"It ain't exactly healthy to go gabbin' promiscuous-like in this part of the country of late, to fellers yuh don't know over much about," he observed. "Mebbe I'm sorta sayin' what I shouldn't be a-sayin', but—Well, I've been known to make mistakes where fellers is concerned but, cowboy, you look sorta straight-lined to me, so I'm a-talkin' some. It ain't nothin' specially against Estrada in person, so far as I know, but his *cantina* is a sorta hangout for some mighty choice specimens at times.

"Funny things has happened all around about here of late. Seems plumb like the cover's boiled offa the hot place all of a sudden for no reason a-tall so far as anybody can make out. There's been killin's and shootin's and knifin's and wide-loopin's, among the milder occurrences. A feller, or what was left of him, was found staked out over a anthill a mite of a spell back. Another poor devil was found all sliced and chopped up, like the Yaquis do with their small knives.

"Still another one was found spread-eagled on the ground with a sidewinder tied side of him with a rawhide noose around its neck. The rawhide thong was run under a coupla forked sticks and a canteen with a hole in the bottom was hung over the sticks so's a drop of water fell on the thong ever so often. That caused the rawhide to stretch till the snake could sink his fangs in the devil's face. He was all black and swole up when they found him—snake had struck him again and again. That's *some* of the things what's been happenin' hereabouts of late."

Hatfield spoke, quietly, but with a note in his voice that made Bigboy Malarkey shiver.

"Jest who were these hombres?"

Malarkey hesitated again, then answered:

"They was all fellers that worked for the spreads over east in Ghost Valley."

"Why was such things done to them?" Hatfield demanded.

Malarkey shrugged, and his single eye burned like a coal.

"That's a sorta question. Seems like somebody don't want some other somebodies stickin' in this section of the country."

"But why?" prodded the big Ranger.

Malarkey shrugged again. "Feller, there yuh got me," he admitted. "And," he added grimly, "there yuh got about everybody else in the whole endurin' country. Old man Slaven, who owns the finest spread in this neck of the woods, over in Ghost Valley, to the east of the crick, told a yarn about Don Nicalosa Gomez bein' almighty put out when he got into these here parts too late to file on the spread Slaven had already roped and tied. But Don Nicalosa settled onto the section of Ghost Valley west of the crick, and that's easy the second best spread hereabouts, so it seems to me it don't make sense that Don Nick would raise all this bobbery to run out a good neighbor. He's got all the range he can use, and more.

"Still, it's a fact that there ain't none of Don Nick's men been staked out or nothin', and his is about the only spread in hereabouts that ain't got walloped in one way or t'other. Why, John Sanderson had hardy got his Bowtie outfit—that's the spread that runs up into the hills jest west of town—had hardly got his Bowtie outfit in workin' order when he had two men drygulched back in the brakes and a hundred or so head of prime steers wide-looped."

THE Ranger considered all this soberly. "It's a wide-loopin' outfit raisin' all the devilment," he suggested.

"Mebbe. But it don't jest make sense. I never heard tell of a wide-loopin' outfit goin' in for promiscuous killin's and torturin's, did you? It

shore ain't to a wide-loopin' outfit's advantage to run spreads outa a country, and that's what it's gonna come to if things keep up. Already it's gettin' almighty hard to hire hands. The word's been gettin' around, and the boys sorta fight shy of this part of the range, and yuh can't blame 'em.

"I hear tell Slaven and Grandpap Wagner wrote to Ranger headquarters over east to ask for a troop. But Ranger headquarters is better'n three hundred miles off, beyond the desert and wasteland and no water. You can't expect a troop to make that trip in a hurry, and not a-tall unless it's a mighty serious business to hand. Besides, I hear tell things up along the Oklahoma line is keepin' the Rangers almighty busy, what with that big outlaw feller Sam Bass and a lot others of his sort.

"I figger Slaven'll jest get word from Cap Bill McDowell that it's a matter for local authorities—and local authorities ain't havin' much luck. Sheriff Cronin moved his office up here from the county seat, which ain't a bad notion on general principles, there bein' about a coupla dozen folks livin' at the county seat and some good deal more'n a coupla hundred livin' here or hangin' out here most of the time. Sheriff Tom is all right, but I don't figger him as much shakes against a problem like he's up against here. Honest and dumb, that's Tom Cronin. Sometimes I figger mebbe Grandpap Wagner was right about his notion."

"What was his notion?" asked Hatfield.

"To form a vigilance committee and take the law in our own hands," Bigboy said promptly. "Grandpap is a fire eater, war veteran, Injun scout, and all."

"The trouble with takin' the law in yore own hands," Hatfield replied gravely, "is that if one set of fellers does that, another set what don't see eye to eye with the first outfit is liable to do the same, and that means trouble a-plenty. When it comes to duly elected or appointed law officers, it's different. Then the only sort of an outfit that won't agree with what they do is the kind of an outfit that's against everything favored by law-abidin' folks. Nope, takin' the law in yore own hands is almighty bad business."

Bigboy Malarkey grinned, a twinkle in his single eye.

"That's a mighty good argument," he agreed, "but it shore sounds sorta funny comin' from a jigger with two guns slung low in cut-out holsters."

Hatfield grinned in sympathy.

"Reckon it does," he agreed a little sheepishly, "but mebbe I'm sorta like the preacher what told his congregation, 'Don't do as I do, folks, but do as I *tell* yuh to do and yuh'll shore go to heaven when yuh die."

With the diminutive Bigboy Malarkey's chuckles following him through the open door, Jim Hatfield left the stable and headed for the main street. He rounded the corner and walked slowly along the crowded board sidewalk, glancing at the lighted windows as he passed.

"Reckon if I pass another place or two I'd oughta hit Estrada's, accordin' to what that little jigger said," he mused. "Uh-huh, I reckon it'd oughta be that big one with the bright windows. It—"

Wham! Wham Wham! Cr-r-rash! Wham! "E-e-e-yow!" Wham!

Hatfield quickened his pace.

"Yeah," he remarked with conviction, "that's it, all right!"

He reached the place from which came the sound of shooting and smashing furniture. Across the big window was the legend:

RAMON ESTRADA

Jim Hatfield headed straight for the *cantina's* swinging doors.

CHAPTER VI

Fighting Man

BULLETS had ceased flying when Hatfield pushed through the swinging doors of Estrada's *cantina,* but the place still boiled like a pot

over a hot fire. Men shouted and cursed, women screamed, a trio of bartenders uttered soothing yells that did nothing to abate the turmoil. The sound of smashing furniture continued.

For an instant Hatfield blinked at the glare, then his vision cleared and he saw, in the very center of the big room, what appeared to be an able-bodied cyclone in full action.

On the floor lay a still smoking gun, and near the gun a little old white-whiskered fellow was dancing and yowling like an enraged tomcat. Facing him was a hulking individual with red-rimmed eyes and a bristling black beard. There was blood on his passion-contorted face and one ear showed the unmistakable nick of a bullet.

In his hand he held a long knife with which he lunged at his dancing adversary. On the far side of the room a man was pushing his way through the dense crowd, hurling yipping men and excited dance floor girls aside as he burrowed toward the scene of the uproar.

Hatfield went through the crowd as if it wasn't there at all. He reached the center of action just as the little old man stumbled over the gun and his opponent, with a hoarse shout of triumph, flung up his knife for the kill.

Hatfield's long arm shot out, he gripped the old man's collar and whisked him from under the downward whizzing knife. In an instant he was tussling with a hundred pounds or so of yowling, fighting fury. He enveloped the old fellow in his long arms and hugged him to his broad breast, chuckling the while, and sidestepping continually to save his shins from the fighting little old tomcat's flailing boots.

"You let me go, dabnab yuh!" howled the oldster, kicking and clawing.

"Easy, old-timer, easy," soothed the Ranger, still chuckling. "Yuh want to get a slit gizzard?"

"Lemme go, blast yuh to everlastin' tarnation—lemme go!" bawled the old fellow, kicking harder than ever.

The boy screamed with agony and leaped (CHAPTER XII)

The crowd howled derision and applause. The bearded man who had failed of the chance to use his wicked-looking knife, fairly foaming at the mouth with rage, was trying to disentangle himself from the jostle of spectators who held him back.

Hatfield got a kick on the shins that hurt. In sheer desperation he whirled the little old man off his feet and tucked him under his right arm, where the oldster kicked and howled and cursed, flailing away at a great rate, but utterly helpless either to escape or to do serious damage.

The bearded man at last got loose. He dived forward with a howl of triumph, barely escaping the clutching hand of the man who had charged the crowd from the far side of the room. The long knife was flung up again, the red-rimmed eyes glared murder.

Hatfield's left arm shot out. His slim-fingered fist, like the steely head of a sledge-hammer, smashed against the big man's jaw. The big man turned a backward flip-flop, landed on his right ear in a spittoon, and stayed there. The crowd yelled astonished approval.

"Bravo!" a clear voice sounded through the turmoil. "That was well done, senor!"

THE speaker was the man who had just forced his way through the crowd. He strode to the sprawled form of the black-bearded man, plucked up his skulking form with apparently no effort and strode with it to the swinging doors.

"Outside, you, until you have cooled off," he said in tones of casual conversation.

He deposited his unconscious burden on the boardwalk and returned to the *cantina*. Hatfield let the little old man back on his feet, and was rewarded with a torrent of abuse.

"Dagnab yuh, yuh over-long good-for-nothin'!" bellowed the oldster. "Why the blue blazes didn't yuh let *me* at the gosh-darned black-livered lobo? What's the idea of hornin' into a private and personal fight like yuh done? Ain't yuh got no raisin's?"

"Sorry, suh, plumb sorry," the Ranger apologized abjectly. "Didn't know it was a private shindig. From the racket that was goin' on I figgered everybody was welcome. Won't happen again."

"You see it don't!" rumbled the belligerent ancient, blowing through his whiskers like a grampus with the colic.

He picked up the gun from the floor, jammed it into his holster, and stalked out with such an air of outraged dignity that Hatfield stifled his grin until the swinging doors had closed behind his stiff old back.

"I thank you, *senor,* for preventing a regrettable happening in my establishment," said a smooth voice, and Hatfield turned to face the man who had carried out the hulking knife-wielder.

"Don't say nothin' more about it," Hatfield replied, glancing down at the speaker from his great height. "Yore place, yuh say? Reckon yuh must be Ramon Estrada, then."

The man nodded. "Yes," he replied, "I am Ramon Estrada."

He spoke in flawlessly unaccented English, but with the stately phrasing of the educated Latin, and his voice had a peculiar bell-note quality to it that interested the Ranger.

Estrada interested him generally, in fact. The Latin was tall and lithe, with the steely slimness of a rapier blade. He had a reckless, astonishingly handsome face, dominated by bitter, burning eyes. He was dark even for a Mexican, but the cameo-perfect features showed no trace of Indian blood and Hatfield was puzzled to classify him racially.

One thing was certain, however. Whatever his racial antecedents, Ramon Estrada was of that blood which can be claimed exclusively by no nation, race, clime or age, but which is the boast and the pride of all.

"I got a notion those old fire-raisin' adventurers, the *conquistadores,* musta looked like him," Hatfield was quickly thinking, as he took in the *cantina* proprietor in one swift, all-embracing glance. "All he needs is plate armor instead of that black vel-

vet he's a-wearin, a plume instead of a sombrero, and a straight sword in place of a Colt and he could pose for a picture of one of 'em. He's real, and ace-high."

WHICH is no doubt just what Jim Hatfield, the man whom a stern and clear-seeing old lieutenant of the Rangers had named the "Lone Wolf," would have said about that grim old Moor who was the first "man of blood" to enter sinister Ghost Valley — that Sebastian-who-was-black. Who, before he died on the far-off northern plains, like a fierce old wolf, with a ring of his slain about him, had loved and won a princess of the blood royal of Spain.

Ramon Estrada bowed with stately courtesy.

"You will dine with me, senor, now that order is restored?" he invited. "I was just sitting down to meat when this disturbance occurred."

The Lone Wolf's answering bow was as courtly and graceful as Estrada's.

Curious glances followed the two men as Estrada led the way to a table near the wall, and low-voiced comment arose all around.

"Didja ever see a finer lookin' pair?" exclaimed an old cowboy. "I'd jest as soon tackle a nest of mountain lions holed up behind a line of buzz saws as them two!"

Which, coming as it did from a man with eleven notches cut in the stock of his old single-action Smith and Wesson, carried considerable weight.

"Who was that loco old gent?" Hatfield asked, as he and Estrada seated themselves and a waiter came forward to take their order.

"That was the Senor Tecumseh Wagner, commonly known as Grandpap Wagner," Estrada answered. "A veteran of two major wars, and a scout in the Indian wars, he forgets the handicap of his eighty-odd years at times. He doesn't see well enough in order to shoot as well as he did half a century ago, which is fortunate for his late adversary, who escaped with a notched ear."

"And the other feller?" asked Hatfield.

"The other fellow," informed Estrada, "is Felipe Acosta. He works for Don Nicalosa Gomez. He is a good workman, but suffers from an ungovernable temper, under the influence of which he loses all sense of proportion, as witness his action of the evening. He and Grandpap had an argument, with the results you observed."

"What were they arguin' about?" Hatfield asked casually.

Ramon Estrada shrugged, and resorted to Latin evasiveness.

"Who knows?" he replied. "The one is a Texan, the other from *Mejico*. Is that not enough to induce argument?"

"Not always," Hatfield disagreed. "I figger you to be from Mexico yoreself, and I'm a Texan, but we appear able to get along all right—leastwise we don't give no indications of wantin' to fly at each other's throats." He grinned amiably.

"Perhaps," admitted Estrada, "but so far as one can ascertain at the moment, we have no cause at all for argument."

"Then those fellers have got cause?"

"So they seem to think," Estrada replied coldly, and Hatfield deemed it wisest to let the matter drop for the present.

THE meal that followed was a good one. Hatfield and Ramon Estrada enjoyed it in leisurely fashion, sipping wine and smoking cigarettes as they ate and talked. Hatfield learned considerable about general range conditions in the country thereabouts, but he quickly realized that Estrada was a man who could talk a great deal without saying anything of a specific nature. The Ranger refrained from asking direct questions until a favorable opportunity should be presented.

Estrada was frequently called to the bar or one of the gaming tables by routine matters of business connected with his big establishment. Hatfield smoked lazily while awaiting his return. Estrada was at the bar when a shifty-eyed individual came slinking

in through the swinging doors and headed directly for where the *cantina* owner stood. Hatfield instantly recognized the man he had rescued from the Bowtie cowboys earlier in the afternoon.

The beady eyes of the half-breed swept the room and centered on the Ranger, but gave no sign of recognition. He approached Estrada in an obsequious manner and talked earnestly for several moments, punctuating his remarks with many repressive gestures. Finally he shuffled into a back room and Estrada returned to the table where the Ranger sat. He eyed Hatfield with a new expression as he sat down.

"I have just heard of your action of earlier in the day," he observed. "Again I wish to thank you for championing one of the lowly and oppressed."

"Didn't seem jest right, what was going on," Hatfield explained, "even though them jiggers mighta had some right on their side, as they seemed to think." And he added, nodding toward the door through which the half-breed had disappeared: "Feller mentioned he was a friend of yores."

Estrada did not smile. "He presumes somewhat upon the attitude of one he considers a fellow countryman," he replied quietly.

"What was the trouble between him and those Bowtie jiggers?" Hatfield asked.

Estrada shrugged. "Judging from the general appearance of *amigo* Carbajal, I would not be surprised if he had not committed some overt act which aroused the ire of the cowmen," he admitted. "But the matter goes deeper. It stems from the feeling that has been developing in this region during the past year. Ill feeling has developed between Don Nicalosa Gomez and his Texan neighbors, who are inclined to blame him for things that have happened here in recent months, although with no concrete evidence upon which to base their suspicions."

"Because he is a Mexican?" asked Hatfield.

"Partly," Estrada nodded. "And partly because his outfit, up to the present moment, at any rate, appears to be immune to the troublesome incidents which have plagued the others in the region."

"Well, that's human nature." Hatfield shrugged carelessly.

"Yes, I suppose so," admitted Estrada, and added, with a faint smile, "As to why Don Nicalosa should be immune from the workings of the curse which is supposed to have been put upon any brave enough to settle here is hard to understand, seeing that he shares Ghost Valley with the Senor Slaven, who certainly has not been immune."

"The curse?" Hatfield pounced on the word quickly. "What's that?"

Ramon Estrada abstractedly regarded the blue trickles from his cigarette a moment before replying.

"Senor," he said at length, "I will tell you a story. It is a fragmentary story, pieced together from old legends and records, many of which are doubtless far from dependable. Your imagination must fill in the blank spaces, and you can surmise and speculate as you will. It is a story that began many, many years—centuries, in fact—ago. But it is one which may perhaps, in a way, answer many of your questions—or leave you more at sea than you are now."

Seated at the table, with the blare of music, the pound of feet on the dance floor and the busy turmoil of the bar resounding in his ears, Jim Hatfield heard the story of Fray Marcos, of Sebastian who was black, of terrible Prince Miguel Telo. And, as he listened, the prosaic scenes of the *cantina* faded and he rode in company with those daring adventurers of a bygone day . . . .

CHAPTER VII

Through the Centuries

IN his liquid tones, and cultivated English, this is the story Ramon Estrada told to Ranger Jim Hatfield:

In emerald billows the rangeland rolled northward. Rangeland untrod-

den as yet save by the blunt hoofs of myriad mighty shaggy creatures with huge heads and truculent eyes. To the west were dark hills whose crags raked the deep blue of the Texas sky like vainly reaching fingers with broken nails. To the east was an infinity of waving grass heads. To the south, the gray mystery of a desert that as yet no man had named, where gaunt chimney rocks and weirdly distorted buttes flung up in startled fashion from the dreary monotony of the alkali and the salt.

Here nothing lived but the lizard and the snake. Here was a waterless desolation that numbed the brain and frayed the nerves to quivering threads. Here the only vegetation was the cactus in a thousand species and varieties, the greasewood and the sage. Here Death waited in brooding readiness for the few victims that came his terrible way.

Few indeed! For life, for the most part, was wary and respected the awful trinity which here stood guard—heat, hunger and thirst.

And yet, under the brassy-blue sky with its blazing sun, across the heat shimmering surface of the salt, marched men. Men whose eyes of visions were fixed on that phantom skyline:

> To where, with lonely starlight
> His brazen plates a-gleam,
> Lost Coronado follows
> A shadow and a dream.

Coronado had long been dead. Dead, or so men said, of a broken heart. But although he did not find the fabulous riches of which he had been told, he did find a place in which to search for them.

And so, though the great explorer's disappointments and disillusion were dimmed by the misty curtain of the years, Coronado's "children" were on the march again, and once more the plains of Texas were a-clang with the trap of armored feet and the jingle of jeweled bridle leather. And athwart the desert sands again rested the advancing shadow of the Cross.

Don Ricardo de Castro, broad of shoulder, stern of eye, led the marchers, those iron men of Spain, but beside him, his tonsured head towering above the horse's withers, strode Fray Marcos, the Franciscan. And behind Fray Marcos, with hempen sandals beating the desert floor, with gray gowns looped to the knee, followed full three score of his monks, lips muttering, eyes cast down.

A strange man was Fray Marcos, even among a company of strange men. He was tall and gaunt and stringy, his hands long and white and nervous. His thin, thought-worn features and sunken, haggard cheeks bespoke one who had indeed beaten down that inner foe whom every man must face, but had none the less suffered sorely in the contest.

BUT ever and anon there gleamed from under his drooping brows a fierce and indomitable energy, and his hard mouth and powerful jaws were the marks of a fighting man, just

[*Turn page*]

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as his great beak of a nose and his lofty brow bespoke the leader of men. The very genius and impersonation of ascetiscism, with lips compressed, and wild, fanatic eyes, he strode the desert sands, bare of foot, bare of head, heedless of the blazing sun, the sharp rocks and the thorns.

Not the fabled gold of Cibola nor the hidden hoards of Montezuma did Fray Marcos seek in this land of desolation. Not in the hope of opals shot with flame and emeralds in whose lucid depths burned the green fires of spring did Fray Marcos cross the frightful gorge that bounds the Big Bend country, this country of the deer, the javelina, the panther and the bear. His was a loftier motive, a grander goal.

In the packs of the mules led by his followers were sledges and crowbars, spades and mattocks, seeds, bags of nails, sickles and other instruments of husbandry and masonry. Fray Marcos would found a mission here in this far-flung dominion of the Spanish king—where the simple people of the land could come to wonder and to pray.

On Don Ricardo's left rode his nephew, Prince Miguel Telo, languid, sleep-eyed, pale of face, eternally twining a lock of raven hair about a waxen forefinger. Soft of speech was the young exquisite, the renegade scion of that ancient and honorable royal house of Navarre, deliberate of movement, always courteous, even when killing a man. But the mother of him had once fainted before the look in Prince Miguel's eyes.

The sun sank westward. The sky was golden as the fabled cities Coronado sought, and crimson as the blood he shed, in vain, to reach them. The forbidding battlements of the hills were ringed about with saffron flame, the desert was bronze and amber, the rangeland beyond the desert's edge a pulsing sea of turquoise fire.

North by west the column marched, with clank of armor plates and thud of chargers' hoofs. Scouting ahead, with a score of somber Yaqui Indians flanking him on either side, was that "Sebastian who was black," the swarthy Moor who, many years before, had ridden stirrup to stirrup with Coronado and that other Moor, great Stephen, the adventurer.

An old man now was black Sebastian. The hair escaping from beneath his helmet and falling to his broad shoulders was white as the driven snow, but he was lance-straight and the swing of his stride and spring of his step showed that he had not yet lost the strength and vigor of his youth.

It was Sebastian's hawk eyes that first noted the canyon mouth, and the flickering fires of *Infierno* which guarded its approach.

Wide was the canyon, a valley, really, with palisaded walls, its broad floor carpeted with grass and grown with parklike stands of trees. It was watered by gushing springs afar up near its barriered head, springs that formed a stream which flowed swiftly down the canyon, then turned sharply eastward to skirt the desert's edge and fall at last into that strange northward sweep of the Rio Grande. The Big Bend.

THE Yaquis paused, staring, muttering, shading their eyes with dark hands and peering fixedly toward that line of flickering fire that rose not far from the frowning eastern wall and half a mile or so up-canyon. From where they viewed it—the cancerous lip of the desert—the wavering line seemed almost continuous, like, indeed, a necklace of glittering beads strung loosely on dark wire.

There was something alien and ominous about the winking beads of light. Not for a moment did either Black Sebastian or the storm-browed Yaquis mistake them for the cooking fires of some emcampment. Strange flickers of blue, of orange, of misty purple played along the segmented line, and the faint breeze that soughed mournfully down the canyon bore to wrinkling nostrils a pungent aroma that was at once irritating and disquieting.

Behind, sounded louder the approaching clang of armed men. Sebastian hesitated a moment more, then

abruptly gave the order to advance. If there was danger evinced by those ominous glows, let the danger bide. Danger had not terrors for black Sebastian.

The Yaquis obeyed, albeit reluctantly. But before now they had known the blazing wrath of black Sebastian and had felt the heavy hand of his anger. The problematical terrors ahead were subordinated to the sure and certain consequences of opposing his iron will.

Now the riders had seen the flickering line of fire that grew brighter as the shadows deepened beyond the canyon's mouth. They, too, peered, necks outthrust, brows knotting querulously beneath the jutting visors of their helmets. Some surreptitiously crossed themselves. The monks clumped together, nervously clicking their beads, sandals shuffling in the sand.

The evident agitation of the brothers did not tend to allay the fears of the soldiery. A wave of panic passed over the mail-clad horsemen, and those rough and hardy fighters who feared no mortal foe shook with terror at the shadows of their own minds.

But Fray Marcos strode onward with shining eyes, and stern Don Ricardo boomed a command. The ranks closed up. The monks resumed their measured stride.

Brighter and brighter grew the flickering lights as the shadows deepened and the distance became less. The horsemen, stiff of back, jaws set hard, still continued to stare with blanched faces, expecting at each instant some fearsome shape would loom from out the shadows. They coughed as a gust of wind sent the bitter fumes rolling down upon them.

But now black Sebastian had passed within the walls of the canyon and was striding fearlessly toward the ominous line of flame. No furtive crossing himself on the part of black Sebastian, no muttering of prayers through his bearded lips. The grim old Moor had no gods and worshiped nothing, unless it was the shining sword at his side.

Straight up to the beads of flame he strode, his Yaquis slinking along behind him. He paused a score of yards distant, peering beneath his hand, then turned and waved reassuringly to the advancing main body.

HORSEMEN rode forward, monks quickened their pace. Don Ricardo knitted his black brows. Fray Marcos' eyes burned with fanatic fire. Only Prince Miguel Telo remained unmoved, twining his lock of curling hair, humming softly under his breath.

And now the horsemen and the brothers could see that the weird flickerings were indeed flame—flame that spouted from crusted openings in the naked rock. They did not rise high, nor did they burn fiercely. It was, rather, a continuous wavering smolder shot through with strange glowings of blue and purple and livid green.

Fearlessly Fray Marcos strode forward, brushing past Black Sebastian. He leaned over a luridly glowing *solfatara* above whose livid lip the flames did not rise. In another instant he was reeling back, choking and retching, firmly convinced that the devil himself had coughed in his face.

"Beware, most holy father," cried Brother Ignacio, the chancellor. "Beware! This is a place accurst!"

Fray Marcos dashed the tears from his streaming eyes, and drew himself up to the full of his towering height.

"Pax!" he thundered. *"Pax!* This is the place appointed. Here shall our mission rise!"

The brothers stared with gaping mouths. The soldiers muttered, and crossed themselves.

"Father, thou art possessed of a devil," said Don Ricardo bluntly.

Like deepest organ notes Fray Marcos' voice rolled forth.

"Pax! Upon this rock will I build my church, and all the fires of hell shall not prevail against it!"

"Thou shalt not!" rumbled Don Ricardo. "I forbid it!"

Wordless, the priest held up his iron crucifix, and Don Ricardo, stern as he was, quailed before that Sign. He turned away, to pitch his camp far to one side of the baleful flames, his lips forming the word, "Madman!"

But Prince Miguel Telo twined his lock of scented hair, and his sleepy eyes beneath their drooping lids speculated the loads upon the backs of the rearmost mules.

CHAPTER VIII

The Offspring of Greed

UPON that fire-blasted rock did Fray Marcos indeed build his mission house. He was no mean engineer, that grim old Franciscan. His method of extinguishing the smoldering flames was at once novel and efficacious.

From the beetling canyon wall the brothers hewed great blocks of stone, such blocks that taxed the strength of three score brawny monks to move with ropes and bars and rollers. Across the smoking fissures they thrust and drew the mighty blocks and, their ponderous weight settling into the softer strata upon which they rested shut off the air supply, stifled the flames and hermetically sealed the openings.

And Brother Ignacio, the historian, wrote it all down in a right clerkly hand on his sheets of vellum which were bound in a book whose heavy clasps were of beaten gold. In his poetic fashion Brother Ignacio wrote:

> And the mountain was riven by the hand of Faith and with great thunderings, and the fires of *Infierno* were quenched and became as if they had never been. Yea, the mystic fires of blue and green and purple or red that sprang from the earth and were fed by the jaundiced earth with great burnings.

But in his private journal, Fray Marcos wrote down all the happenings in stern and soldierly language, concise and to the point. And also a logical and scientific explanation of the peculiar natural phenomena of the valley, so clear that even the untutored could understand. But this journal no man read.

Upon the blocks did Fray Marcos lay his foundation stones, and tier by tier the walls of the great mission rose.

A year, and half a year the brothers labored before all was complete, even to the glittering altar decked with the fortune in gold and jewels which they had brought with them from the great parent mission in Mexico.

And ofttimes during those weary months of building did grim Fray Marcos, together with his trusted dignitaries—his sacrist, his lector, his chaplain, the master of the novices, and his chancellor, Brother Ignacio, he of the dreamy eyes and the soul of a poet—labor through the dark hours between a sun and a sun. He labored at a secret and momentous work while the worn-out monks slept the sleep of utter fatigue. But of this Brother Ignacio wrote nothing.

The simple *Indios* of the mountains came to the mission, came to stare and marvel—and remained to pray. The work of converting the mountain people to the Faith prospered, and Fray Marcos felt amply rewarded for the years of toil and hardship. If he ever thought of the adventurers who had vanished into the unknown north, of Don Ricardo, Sebastian who was black, Prince Miguel Telo with his waxen face and terrible eyes, he kept those thoughts to himself, for no man ever heard him speak of his former comrades, "Coronado's Children."

But Brother Ignacio, the historian, thought of them, and conjectured in poetic language in his diary their possible fate.

THE greater part of another year passed, and out of the north rode a scanty troop of gaunt survivors.

Don Ricardo was dead. His bones, and those of black Sebastian bleached amid the grasses of a far-off prairie, where stone arrowheads had struck them down. Among those waving grasses lay, too, by far the greater number of his soldier-adventurers, their cuirasses rusted by the rains, the luster of their bright blades dimmed. All had died at the hands of those savage fighters who were in a later day to overrun the plains of Texas and slaughter or drive away the more peaceful Indians who for untold ages had called those plains home.

But the sinister Yaquis, those un-

willing followers of black Sebastian, had survived, as had the majority of the reckless, depraved and conscienceless young gallants who were the immediate retainers of Prince Miguel Telo. And at their head, still twining his lock of scented hair, still looking out upon the world with the eye of the basilisk, rode Prince Miguel himself. Only Prince Miguel and his nearest followers knew the truth of that outrage which had aroused the fighting tribes of the northern plains to fury and brought about the death of Don Ricardo and the others.

The good brothers of the mission made the wanderers welcome and provided amply for their comfort.

Prince Miguel was courteously grateful for all that was done for him and his exhausted followers, and not even shrewd and watchful Brother Ignacio doubted the reverance with which the young elegant bowed before the glittering altar that outshone even the gems that encrusted the heavy gold of the shrine.

Their strength renewed after days of good living and rest, the adventurers rode away, waving their farewells

The cloth crumbled to dust (CHAPTER XIX)

to the brothers, with steel gauntleted hands. But in the darkness of the following night they returned, and with steel gripped within the steel which sheathed their palms.

Straight to the great iron-bound door they rode, swords out and ready for slaughter—to be met by a storm of lead from the matchlocks held by the monks behind the massive walls.

For a friendly Indian had warned Fray Marcos of the murderers creeping back under cover of darkness to rob and slay, and the grim old Franciscan was ready.

The raiders fell back in confusion, leaving more than one of their number lying before the iron-bound door, and for the moment it seemed that the attack was beaten off. But they were fighters, those reckless wastrels who had followed a mad prince into the unknown mysteries of the Western World. And to Prince Miguel Telo fear was only a word he had heard, but had never understood.

Through the dark hours they stormed the mission walls. And as the quiet dawn threw its red mantle over the lonely mountains, they battered down the great door and gained entrance.

THE brothers died to a man, and died with a ring of their slain about them. Torches blazing, the victorious raiders roared triumphantly toward the great altar—and halted with unbelieving oaths, peering, unwilling to believe their eyes.

For no glittering gems reflected back the gleam of the torches, no heavy gold smoldered richly in the glow. The altar was bare, stripped of its gigantic fortune in jewels and metal.

Cursing and brawling, the brigands stormed through the mission, searching, destroying, finding nothing of worth. Utterly baffled, they gathered once more in the great altar room and systematically searched the bodies of the slain brothers.

"Where is the arch-priest?" Prince Miguel suddenly demanded. "His body is not here."

It was true. Nowhere was to be found the gaunt form of Fray Marcos.

"I saw his face in the battle," declared a soldier. "He was sore smitten. The blood ran down his face and he fought left-handed. See where Pedro lies, cloven to the chin? At the hand of the *Abad* did he get his death."

"He has escaped," exclaimed another, "and with him went the gold and the gems of the altar!"

"Fool!" swore Prince Miguel. "Not even a rat could have crossed the outer *patio* without our seeing. And to bear away such a burden would have been far past the strength of one man, and he sore wounded. Search for hidden places."

"We have searched, Sire," replied his lieutenant. "There are no hidden places. These walls are of stone, the blocks huge and ponderous. There are no panels that might lead to secret passages."

"Tear forth the altar!" commanded Prince Miguel. "Perhaps the hidden place is there."

They did so, albeit somewhat reluctantly, for fear was beginning to steal into their hearts. And they found—nothing.

Dark of brow, his eyes terrible, Prince Miguel surveyed the scattered wreckage.

"Torches!" he spat out at length. "Fire the roof, the furnishings. We will burn this place accurst."

Flame licked the carven beams and the painted woodwork of the lofty roof. Last at the door, Prince Miguel looked back. Inside the great altar room was a fiery glow that crimsoned the mighty walls. And behind where the great altar had stood, Fray Marcos' iron crucifix, imbedded in the ponderous stone, was stained as by slow spilling blood. A red gleam shot from its surface, worn smooth and polished from much handling, and the baleful ray seemed to center on Prince Miguel's ashen face and mark his brow as with that mark of Cain from which men, shuddering, turned aside.

With a prophetic shiver, Prince Miguel Telo spun on his heel, cowed by a vague but terrible premonition of the death that would be his in later days—a death of blood and lingering agony.

WITH fiery thunderings the room fell in, and flame and smoke spouted from every window and embrasure of the ruined mission. But still the mighty walls stood, impervious to the flame, as they would stand impervious to the centuries and

the wind and the rain and the sun of the passing years.

Engrossed in the destruction his hand had wrought, Prince Miguel did not see one of his swarthy Yaquis furtively hide something within the ample front of his fringed and beaded shirt. It was Brother Ignacio's history of the mission from the day of its inception. The pages written in a right clerkly hand meant nothing to the Yaqui, but he knew gold when he saw it, and the ponderous bands and clasps that bound the boards were well worth some little risk.

And so Brother Ignacio's diary was preserved, to pass from hand to hand throughout the years to come, to be read by a few, to be pondered over by fewer still, to be understood by but one. And from that understanding was to come blood and suffering and death—the baleful offspring of avarice and greed.

CHAPTER IX

Guns in the Dark

RAMON ESTRADA concluded his story dramatically.

"My grandmother many times removed," he said, "was that princess of Spain who married Sebastian, the Moor of Andalusia, and journeyed with him to the wilds of *Mejico*. She brought with her a fortune in gold and jewels and, being very religious, loaned much of her fortune to the Franciscan Brothers to adorn their altars. The greater portion of the jewels, says the legend, were brought to Texas by Fray Marcos when he journeyed here to found a mission.

"The renegade prince, Miguel of Navarre, slew Fray Marcos and his brethren for the jewels, says the legend, but never obtained them. They vanished during the storming of the old mission house, spirited away by the devil, some say, because he, the Prince of Evil, was jealous of Prince Miguel, a human prince of evil. Anyway, it seems fairly certain that Prince Miguel never got them, nor anybody else, so far as any account or legend tells. But the story persists, and the story of the curse that is supposed to rest on Ghost Valley in consequence. That curse is supposed to touch anyone who settles in the valley, to this day."

"Quite a yarn," Hatfield commented. "And accordin' to the story, those jewels bein' jest loaned to the brothers, would make 'em rightly belong to you, as the descendent of the princess, in a straight line, down to now—if they should ever happen to be found."

Hatfield spoke jocularly, but Ramon Estrada did not smile.

"Yes," he said simply, "and with them, doubtless, the full working power of the curse."

The Lone Wolf chuckled, but again Ramon Estrada did not smile.

"I know it sounds like nonsensical superstition," he said, "but nevertheless, trouble seems to beset anyone who ventures within the sphere of influence of Ghost Valley. I myself came here, impelled by the legend which has persisted in my family for generations, when I heard a settlement had arisen, and immediately the curse descended upon me in its most malignant form."

He spoke with such an intensity of bitterness that Hatfield glanced in surprise at his proud, sensitive and unbelievably handsome face. It was dark with emotion suppressed with an iron hand.

"Yes?" Hatfield prompted softly.

But Estrada did not choose to elaborate.

"You yourself," the Latin *cantina* owner remarked, his voice emotionless once more," "according to your own story, have been in the district but a matter of hours. Yet already you have made bitter enemies. Felipe Acosta will not forget the blow you struck him. He will brood over it until it grows to a fancied great wrong, and doubtless he will seek revenge. Nor will the Bowtie cowboys lightly forgive your interruption of their gentle pastime out on the desert."

Hatfield shrugged his impressively broad shoulders.

"We'll fork that bronc when his saddle's cinched," he replied. "By the way, what is that Bowtie outfit, anyhow, seein' as I'm liable to get mixed up with it?"

"A man by the name of Sanderson owns it," Estrada explained. "He came here, I understand, some time after Slaven and Don Nicalosa first settled Ghost Valley. He chose to take land over here in the hills rather than upon the prairie to the east of the valley, doubtless because he surmised that here a town would arise."

"How's that?" Hatfield asked curiously. "What special good could that do a rancher?"

"Because he had an eye to business other than the cattle business," said Ramon Estrada. "He was not content merely to be a rancher, with what profits he could make from his cattle. He opened a *cantina* here and immediately did a good business."

"Better business than yuh're doin'?" Hatfield grinned, glancing at the crowded bar. "Seems to me yuh're doin' kind of all right."

Estrada smiled a trifle wryly. He indicated with a flirt of his hand the riotous young cowboys and the more than a sprinkling of uncertain characters that filled the place.

"Sanderson gets a somewhat different custom," he admitted. "About all the ranch owners go to his place—few, if any, make it a habit to come here. About the only one I get, aside from Don Nicalosa, is Grandpap Wagner, and he comes here, I feel sure, because he figures he has a better chance to find a fight here than any place else in town."

Hatfield grinned. "Jest the same, it seems to me yuh got a pretty fair to middlin' crowd here right now," he comforted. "Most of them young fellers is straight twine. Wild, mebbe, and sorta loud, but I got a notion they'd come through with ropes swingin' in a pinch. Them young Mexican fellers don't look so bad, either."

"They're not," agreed Estrada. "They come here because they look upon me as a fellow countryman, even though I am not."

"No?" Hatfield raised his eyebrows. Somehow he had taken it for granted that Ramon Estrada was Mexican.

"My people have been Texans for generations," Estrada replied. "They really never were Mexican. They left Mexico and settled this side of the Border while Mexico was still a Spanish province. There is little resemblance to true Mexicans in either my faher or my mother. My swarthy coloring is a throwback to my Moorish ancestor, Sebastian, who was of the royal Moorish house of Andalusia. But here in Saba I am looked upon as a Mexican by most. Which doubtless is the reason why the majority of the ranch owners prefer Sanderson's First Chance Saloon to my *cantina*."

Hatfield nodded his understanding, and rose to his feet. He hesitated a moment, for a plan was forming in his mind. The business which had brought him to the Ghost Valley country was appearing much more complicated then he had at first thought, since he had heard Estrada's story, and it called for some subtle handling.

"YUH know anything about hirin' conditions hereabouts?" he asked. "I could sorta use a job of ridin' about now."

Estrada did not reply at once.

"I do not believe a tophand, such as you appear to be, would have any trouble getting on at any of the ranches," he said after a moment's thought. "I understand most of them are having difficulty getting men of late. I presume that a word from me to Don Nicalosa would induce him to hire you, and, frankly, I would advise you to go to work for him, if you really do consider a job in this region. The Cross G is the only spread it appears to be safe to work for. Most of Nicalosa's hands are Mexican *vaqueros*, but he has some Texans, and I believe he is always glad of the opportunity to hire a tophand."

"That'll be fine," Hatfield thanked him heartily. "I'll drop around tomorrow to see yuh about that job, if that's convenient. Right now I think I'll hunt me a little shut-eye."

He shook hands with Estrada and

left the *cantina*. After a moment's hesitation, standing with his tall form clearly outlined against the lighted window, he decided to go to bed.

"Eighteen hours in the hull ain't no light chore," he told himself with decision, "and I'm dog tired. Figger anyhow I'll think better after poundin' my ear for a spell, and this mess is beginnin' to look like it might need a heap of heavy thinkin' before I can get to the bottom of the trouble here. That First Chance place will keep."

He headed down the street toward the alley upon which Malarkey's stable was situated. Before reaching it he passed from the brightly lighted section of town into a locality of shadows relieved only by an occasional lantern hung on a pole. The mouth of the alley was in almost total blackness. A half score of yards from it he passed beneath a last smoky lantern.

His forward swinging step ended in a convulsive leap as flame gushed from the blackness of the alley mouth. A gun boomed sullenly, slam-banging echoes back and forth between the shack walls, and the tall form of the Ranger sprawled in the dust. . . .

In men who ride down the years with danger as a constant saddle companion there develops an unexplain-

able sixth sense which warns of peril when, to all appearances, none is present. It was the sudden clamoring of this unseen monitor within his brain that had caused Jim Hatfield to cast a swift and penetrating glance toward the black alley mouth for no apparent reason. A glance that caught the smoky gleam of the lantern reflected on shifting metal the instant before flame gushed from the shadows.

That convulsive leap was carrying his long body forward and down even as the hidden gun roared. The bullet fanned his face with its deadly breath. He hit the dust, writhed sideward into the shadow of a wall and jerked his gun all in one lithe movement. He sent three shots crashing into the alley mouth and instantly shifted position. Two answering flashes blazed toward him and the slugs thudded into the dust where his body had been the moment before.

He took quick aim and fired at the flashes. This time he was answered by a wailing curse and a sound of floundering about inside the alley mouth. He sent the last bullet in his gun toward the sound and slid forward in a squirming crouch, drawing from his left holster. There was a clatter of boot soles and a swift drumming as someone raced up the alley.

FOR a tingling instant Hatfield crouched, listening. Then he took a chance against a possible trap and zigzagged toward the alley mouth.

Reaching it, he bounded into the denser shadows, pausing a moment, holding his breath and straining his ears. Far up the alley he heard a whisper of flying feet that flickered almost instantly to silence as his unknown attacker disappeared from the vicinity, fast.

Hatfield straightened up, slipping shells into his empty gun, still listening intently. Hearing nothing move, after awhile he holstered the gun, batted the dust from his clothes and, confident that now the alley was untenanted by other than himself, struck a match. The brief flicker showed, as he had expected it would, a spatter of blood spots in the dust.

It showed something else. Lying against a shack wall was a gun with half of one butt plate knocked off.

Hatfield whisked out the match, picked up the gun and shoved it into his coat pocket.

"Got him in the hand," he muttered. "Knocked him loose from his hogleg, but didn't damage his runnin' ability to any extent. Let's see, now, if he was shootin' right-handed, and the odds are he was, the chances are the slug didn't much more than knock a piece of meat from one of his fingers. Not a two-gun man evidently, or he woulda been apt to stay and shoot it out. Couldn't find his gun in the dark and decided to sift sand. Well, bus'-

ness is pickin' up."

With that, he headed for the stable. He was approaching the door when he heard an ominous double click and then a quiet voice saying:

"That'll be far enough till yuh sorta ident'fy yoreself, hombre!"

CHAPTER X

A Protest

HATFIELD quickly stepped into the deeper shadow, although he was sure he recognized the voice as belonging to Bigboy Malarkey. He called out the name of the stableman and a moment later heard steps descending the stairs. The door opened.

"Heard the shootin' and yippin' down the alley," Malarkey explained. "Then a jigger hightailed past so fast he whizzed. So I jest holed up alongside the winder upstairs with a sawed-off and waited developments. Was you part of that ruckus down there?"

"Seems like I was," Hatfield admitted. "Somebody was layin' for somebody, I reckon, and I happened along at jest the right time."

"Musta been the wrong time for the feller what was doin' the layin'," Malarkey remarked dryly. "That is, judgin' from the hurry he was in when he went past here. Where'd yuh hit him? Yuh got any idea?"

"Gun hand, I'm a-thinkin'," Hatfield replied briefly. He had decided to take the little man into his confidence, to a certain extent, so he added, as he drew forth the gun with the smashed handle that he had found: "Here's what the jigger left behind."

Malarkey took the weapon and examined it curiously, his eyes narrowing as he studied it.

"Funny sorta shootin' iron for this part of the country," was his comment. "Look at the length of the barrel."

"Shoulder holster iron, I'd say," Hatfield remarked, "and a sorta off caliber. Yuh don't often see that west of the Pecos. More of an Eastern kind of weapon."

"What is it?" asked Malarkey. "Can't say as I ever did see that size myownself."

Hatfield flipped one of the long, "shouldered" cartridges into his palm and held it for Malarkey to see.

"Thirty - two - twenty," he said. "Small lookin' slug, but she's a wolf! Hits one awful wallop and carries better'n even a forty-five. Not so much shockin' power, though. Nice light gun for a feller that don't wanta advertise he's packin' one. I knowed a two-gun jigger once who packed one of these in his boot. Couldn't nobody tell he had one. Take two reg'lation Colts offa him that he also packed and he was still set to do some mighty mean fangin'."

"Mebbe the jigger that packed this was that sort," Bigboy surmised thoughtfully.

"Don't think so," Hatfield disagreed. "He pawed the dust a minute tryin' to find this one after I knocked it outa his hand. He wouldn'ta done that if he'd had another iron handy. I figger he carried this smoke wagon under his left shoulder and drew and shot with his right hand. See, it's the left-hand plate that's smashed and I'm right shore the jigger wasn't hard hit or he couldn'ta hightailed so fast. Which wouldn't been the case if the slug had gone through the back of his hand to bust the plate. The shock of that would most likely have bowled him over, instead of jest stingin' a few cuss words outa him."

"Yuh're smart!" admired Bigboy. "Feller, yuh oughta be one of them, now, detectives. . . ."

JIM HATFIELD was awakened late the following morning by Bigboy Malarkey hammering on the door of his little room.

"Coupla gents downstairs that say they want to see you," announced Bigboy, giving the Ranger a rather surprised glance, as though he had just learned a rather astonishing thing about this tall rider.

Hatfield dressed and descended, and found Ramon Estrada and another man awaiting him. The second man

was as tall as Estrada and as lance-straight, but undoubtedly much older than the handsome, reckless descendent of Sebastian the Moor and his Spanish princess. His raven hair was sprinkled with gray and there were lines of living in his lean face and etched deeply about his cold pale eyes.

"Hatfield, this is my friend, Don Nicalosa Gomez, owner of the Cross G," Estrada introduced. "He is riding back to his spread this afternoon, and if you are still in the market for that job you spoke to me about last night you can ride with him back to his spread."

"Thanks," Hatfield acknowledged. "Yeah, I can use a job all right, Don Nicalosa, providin' I size up right to you."

Don Nicalosa ran his cold gaze over the Lone Wolf's lean, broad-shouldered six-foot-four of husky manhood.

"You certainly are sizable enough," he said, with a quick smile.

His glance rested for an instant on the Ranger's slim, powerful hands.

"It would appear you have not used a rope much of late," he remarked significantly, his gaze centered on the queerly shaped callouses on thumb and forefinger, callouses that were never made by running twine.

"A foreman doesn't handle a rope overmuch," Hatfield replied instantly.

He had not missed Don Nicalosa's evident interest in the hammer-and-trigger marks on his thumbs and forefingers, but preferred not to mention that at the moment. If this Cross G rancher preferred to believe he had tagged a gunman—so be it.

"I was the foreman of the Triangle H for quite a spell," he went on to explain. Which was true, the Triangle H having been his father's ranch in the days before worry over business reverses had caused the elder Hatfield's death. That sad event had also cut short Jim Hatfield's college career—and sent him eventually into the Rangers, though that was something of which he did not not mean to speak.

Don Nicalosa nodded.

"I have a foreman—at present," he remarked suggestively, "but I can use a good hand or two. Most of my riders are *vaqueros* from below the Line. I am Mexican, although educated in the United States, and like to provide opportunity for my countrymen when possible, but they are too prone to confuse fine riding and fancy rope work with efficient cattle handling. I find that a leaven of more practical Texans is much to my financial advantage."

HATFIELD smiled his understanding. He, too, had had experience with those wild horsemen who, all too often, were liable to turn a steer a couple of somersaults at the end of a taut rope, with disastrous consequences to the animal's market value.

"You will dine at my *cantina* before riding?" Estrada asked.

When Hatfield had accepted the invitation with a nod, the *cantina* owner departed. Don Nicalosa lingered while Hatfield got his rig onto Goldy and shook hands with Bigboy Malarkey.

"Drop in whenever yuh hit town," Bigboy invited cordially. "Been right interestin' to have yuh here with me. Gets kinda lonesome sometimes."

Hatfield and Don Nicalosa walked up the street, the Ranger leading Goldy. The great golden horse picked his way along daintily at the edge of the sidewalk. There was a hitch-rack across the street from Estrada's place, and there Hatfield left the sorrel beside Don Nicalosa's black mount.

"Just a moment," said the Cross G owner as Hatfield turned toward the *cantina*. "I would like to step into a place up the street a little ways, for just a moment. Come along with me."

Without comment, Hatfield accompanied his new employer. Don Nicalosa pushed through the swinging doors of a big saloon on a corner farther along the main street.

"The First Chance saloon," he remarked. "John Sanderson's place. That is he at the table, smoking a cigar."

Sanderson, Jim Hatfield saw, was a stocky, dark man with deep-set eyes. He was neatly dressed in a compromise between range and town clothes.

His own table companion, a big grizzled man with a drooping mustache and a short, thick beard, wore regulation cow country garb, including batwing chaps over his overalls, and heavy leather riding gloves. Neither wore hardware, so far as Hatfield could ascertain. Both looked up inquiringly as Don Nicalosa strode toward their table.

"Sanderson," Don Nicalosa said in his quiet voice, "I have come here to to protest the unjustifiable attack your men made upon one of my hands. It is no fault of theirs that the assault did not end in murder. Doubtless you have heard about it and I don't need to go into details."

Sanderson stared a moment, then shrugged.

"I can't be responsible for everything my men do, Gomez," he replied in a voice that was almost surly. "I don't approve of people taking the law into their own hands, as a rule, but it would appear my men considered they were justified, especially considerin' that the forces of law and order, as represented by our good sheriff, don't seem to get many results in this particular part of the world."

Don Nicalosa was about to speak again when the big man across the table broke in.

"Yuh can't over blame the boys, Gomez, when they track that saddle-colored hellion of yores from a shot and skinned steer and when they catch up with him they find a green hide tied back of his saddle."

"Did the hide bear a Bowtie brand?" Don Nicalosa asked quietly.

"Nope, it didn't," the big man said shortly, "but yuh know blamed well that at this time of year there's plenty unbranded dogies running around on the range."

"The man swore to me that the hide was from a broken-leg steer he found on my north range and was forced to shoot," Don Nicalosa said heatedly. "You know it is hard to break a peon of such pilfering. I punish my men whenever I catch them at such practices. But it hardly justifies crucifying the culprit to a cholla cactus and leaving him to die by torture and thirst."

BOTH Sanderson and the big man listened interestedly. The big fellow in the range clothes pawed off his left-hand glove and deftly rolled a cigarette with the powerful fingers of that one hand. Hatfield watched the process intently and his black brows drew together slightly as the man shifted his boot and struck a match.

"I can't see as there was any particular harm done," commented Sanderson. "Except"—he shot a meaning glance at Hatfield—"except that one of my men suffered a bullet-smashed hand give him by a stranger that happened along. The boys jest intended

givin' that feller a good scare, and nothin' would have come of it if they had been left alone and an outsider hadn'ta took a hand. They'd have cut that half-breed down in a little while."

Don Nicalosa made a gesture of distaste.

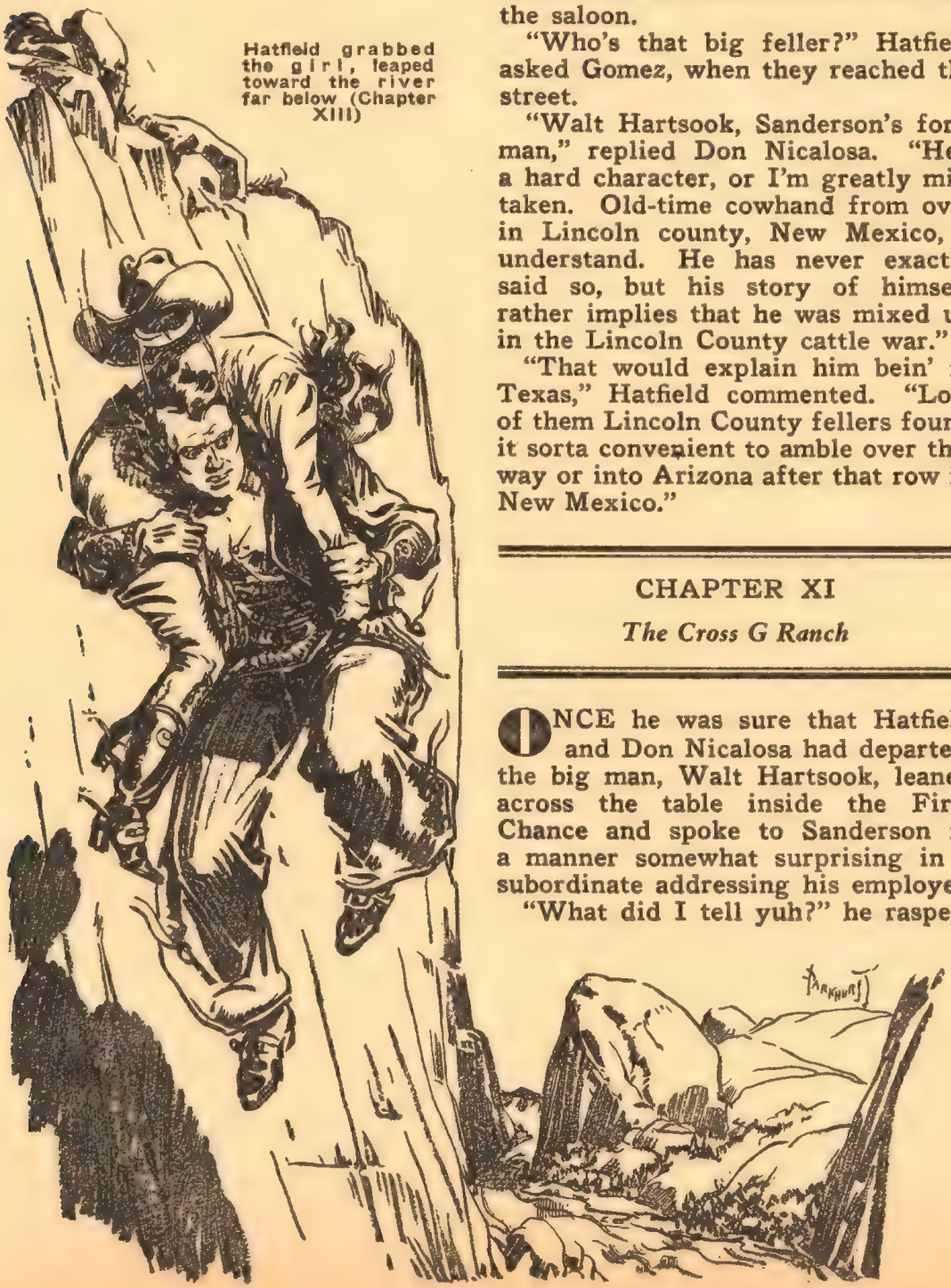
"Very well," he said, with the air of closing the argument. "I ask nothing but to conduct my affairs in peace, but I want it distinctly understood that I will not be imposed upon."

Sanderson smiled deprecatingly, but made no answer. The big man's heavy lids drooped a trifle over his expressionless eyes, but he said nothing. Hatfield and Don Nicalosa turned without another word and left the saloon.

"Who's that big feller?" Hatfield asked Gomez, when they reached the street.

"Walt Hartsook, Sanderson's foreman," replied Don Nicalosa. "He's a hard character, or I'm greatly mistaken. Old-time cowhand from over in Lincoln county, New Mexico, I understand. He has never exactly said so, but his story of himself rather implies that he was mixed up in the Lincoln County cattle war."

"That would explain him bein' in Texas," Hatfield commented. "Lots of them Lincoln County fellers found it sorta convenient to amble over this way or into Arizona after that row in New Mexico."



Hatfield grabbed the girl, leaped toward the river far below (Chapter XIII)

CHAPTER XI

The Cross G Ranch

ONCE he was sure that Hatfield and Don Nicalosa had departed, the big man, Walt Hartsook, leaned across the table inside the First Chance and spoke to Sanderson in a manner somewhat surprising in a subordinate addressing his employer.

"What did I tell yuh?" he rasped,

his ungloved left hand opening and closing. "What did I tell yuh when Shorty brought in his report last night? Didn't I say there was trouble in the wind? Two-gun, quick-draw men like that big hellion don't drop into a section from nowhere jest by chance, and do what he did over there in the desert when he turned loose that saddle-colored half-breed. Then he hits town and goes straight to Estrada, who is Gomez' friend. I told yuh somebody sent for him, shore as guns, and it turns out to be Gomez. Yuh underestimated Gomez. Yuh said yuh was naturally a better judge of his breed than I could be. This looks like it!"

"Careful," warned Sanderson. "There are men at the bar. They'll hear yuh."

The big foreman lowered his voice and appeared to choose his words with care.

"Uh-huh, I getcha," he rumbled. "But I tell yuh, Sa—Sanderson, Gomez is where the trouble makin' lies, and where it will be. He's all-fired smarter than yuh figger him to be. He's got somethin' under his hat besides black hair. And now he runs that big ice-eyed hellion into the game. *Where* have I seen that tall hombre before? I know I've seen them devilish green eyes somewheres before now, and I've got a large notion I've seen 'em lookin' across gun-sights."

"I've got me a notion if yuh had, yuh wouldn't be here tellin' about it now," Sanderson put in grimly. "That fellow's plumb poison!"

"I've got good reason to know it!" growled Hartsook. "Well, there's one good thing for us to remember. Things can't slip up all the time. Luck don't always break the same way."

"If it is luck," Sanderson remarked significantly.

"Couldn't be anything else," Hartsook growled. "We'll see if it breaks the same the next time." He stood up, drawing on his glove. "Well, I'll ride out and round up the boys, and tell 'em they got a little chore that needs doin'. We gotta fight fire with fire. That's the only way—fire."

"I'd shore like to find some," Sanderson replied cryptically.

"Keep lookin'," grunted Hartsook. "That's *yore* job. . . ."

The sun was setting and the western wall of Ghost Valley was rimmed with strange fires when Hatfield and Don Nicalosa Gomez reached the mouth of the great canyon. Far to the east, a line of trees marked the course of the swift little river, and not far from the lip of the desert, now a far-reaching mystery of purple and gold and paling amber, Hatfield could catch a glimpse of its silvery gleam. The great cup of the valley was atremble with alternating blue and gold where sunlight and shadow waged their eternal warfare, and the sky above was a scarlet flame.

"A pretty country, a mighty pretty country," the Ranger remarked in his deep voice.

"Yes," Don Nicalosa replied bitterly. "With all this beauty about them, one would think that men would be content to live beside one another in peace and amity—not be eternally eaten up with greed for each other's possessions."

His finely featured face was somber and there was a deep, brooding light in his pale eyes as he looked far off into the sunset, thoughtfully.

"Sometimes," the Lone Wolf said softly, "sometimes folks don't understand."

"But why doesn't understanding come to them?" cried the Mexican, with sudden flaming resentment.

Hatfield smiled, and for the moment his stern face was wonderfully gentle.

"Don't be too impatient, Don Nicalosa," he said. "Remember, God Almightly makes a squash in a single summer, but He takes a hundred years to grow an oak tree!"

"Perhaps you are right," the *hidalgo* admitted reluctantly. "I had had never looked at it in that light." He turned in his sadddle and stared at his tall companion. "You are a strange man—for a wandering cowboy," he remarked wonderingly.

"Yeah, mebbe," Hatfield agreed

without a smile. "For a wanderin' cowboy."

As they rode up the darkening valley, Don Nicalosa gestured to the east.

"Over there, beyond the river, is the range of the Senor Wirt Slaven," he said. "His *casa* is near the mouth of the valley."

"He built the old mission house over for a ranchhouse for himself, didn't he?" Hatfield asked.

"Yes," said Don Nicalosa, his eyes somber again. "The old mission."

The newly built Cross G ranchhouse proved to be commodious and comfortable. When Hatfield rode up with his new employer he noted the good barns and tight corrals. There was also a roomy bunkhouse for the hands.

"However, I prefer that you occupy a room in the *casa,*" Don Nicalosa said to him. "The one to the right at the head of the stairs I think you will find comfortable. My foreman is across the hall from you and you can discuss ranch matters with him."

Hatfield nodded agreement. As they entered the ranchhouse yard and rode to the stables, where a wrangler took the horses, Hatfield noted a number of small cabins situated some distance from the main buildings.

"My peons live there," explained Don Nicalosa, interpreting his glance. "I brought quite a number with me from Mexico. I intend to cultivate some acres of land here and they are all good farmers. It is good soil, and should produce excellent crops. Winter hay will be valuable, and I anticipate a good market for other produce."

"Yuh're dead right about that," Hatfield agreed heartily. "If cowmen in general would pay more mind to that angle of the business, they'd be better off. Haystacks come in mighty handy in bad weather, and winter vegetables go a long ways toward keepin' beef and hog-hip and cackle berries from gettin' too tiresome as a steady diet."

Hatfield met Ralpho, the foreman, that night. Ralpho was a jolly little man who undoubtedly knew the cow business from hock to horns. The following morning after a good night's rest in a comfortable bed, Jim Hatfield met the Cross G hands, and whistled under his breath as he surveyed them.

THE majority were reckless young Mexicans with little devils dancing in their black eyes. Then there were half a dozen Texans in whose eyes the devils had grown bigger and bolder and harder to control. Most of them, the Texans, not the devils, wore two guns, and they didn't wear them in the manner of ornaments.

Hatfield shrewdly deduced that at least six of the half dozen were men who had left other sections in one whooping hurry for one reason or another. Here, west of the Pecos, in the Big Bend, was sanctuary for the wildest and most reckless, and Don Nicalosa appeared to have collected together the cream of a badly curdled skimming.

"And, accordin' to what I can learn, this outfit is sorta on the prod against the rest of the spreads hereabouts," the Ranger mused. "If this isn't the makin' of a kettle of mighty high-smellin' fish, I shore am doin' some tangled guessin'."

The Cross G was a good range, Hatfield quickly decided, as fine a one as he had encountered in many a long day's ride. Good grass, plenty of water, plenty of shelter, level and easy to work. Only toward the head of the valley, many miles from its mouth, was badly broken ground to be encountered.

But here the canyon did itself proud. Here were canyons within canyons, like nested boxes of a Chinese puzzle. Here, where the great springs which fed the river boiled from beneath a towering wall of black stone, were dizzy cliffs and deep gulleys, rifts and faults. Here were dense growths of manzanita and other chaparral. The valley walls were lower here, however, and Hatfield felt sure that there were ways over them to the west and north.

And here, through the natural perversity of the bellowing beasts, cattle persisted in straying, to fall over cliffs, to get bogged down in marshy

ground near the springs, to lose themselves in profitless dry washes. Hatfield, in company with his fellow waddies, spent several weary days rooting obstinate dogies out of trouble before he could find an opportunity to put into effect a plan he had been formulating ever since he had signed up with the outfit.

Jim Hatfield found the attitude of the Cross G punchers ample reason for ominous foreboding. With one exception, he found no cause for complaint concerning their attitude toward himself. The reckless daredevils from *manana* land, and the wild Texans from anywhere except where they were at the moment appeared to take it for granted that he was a kindred spirit, and accepted him accordingly.

Scrawny little José Carbajal, the peon the Ranger had rescued from the Bowtie cowboys, seemed to live in a state of secret terror, which, for some reason extended to Hatfield also. Perhaps, the Lone Wolf Ranger reasoned, because of the sound going-over he had received from Don Nicalosa relative to the matter of the purloined hide, and José knew that Hatfield was aware of that.

On the other hand, the hulking Felipe Acosta undoubtedly nursed a grievance against Hatfield. Felipe still had a somewhat swollen jaw and its tenderness did not let him forget the man who had knocked him unconscious with a single blow, and thereby robbed him of his revenge on Grandpap Wagner. The slowly healing bullet-notched ear was another reminder which did not tend to develop the forgiving spirit in the morose Felipe.

CHAPTER XII

The Tightening Noose

NEITHER José's furtiveness nor Felipe's scowls worried the Ranger, however. Among the Cross G riders a feeling persisted, and found continued vocal outlet, that sooner or later, there would be a showdown between the Cross G and the other spreads in the Valley district. What was more, most of them seemed to welcome the idea, appeared to be eager for battle.

"She's comin'," a young Texan who packed two guns and a knife a yard long and was known as Clem declared to Hatfield. "Yeah, she's comin', shore as shootin'. This outfit is gettin' the blame for everything that goes wrong in this whole endurin' part of the country, and for no reason a-tall except that the boss is a oiler. Mebbe he is a oiler, but jest the same there ain't a whiter man ever spit on the soil. I'm for him to the finish, feller. I got good reason to be." He nodded in confirmation, and his lips firmed determinedly.

"How's that, Clem?" Hatfield asked.

Clem looked uncomfortable for a moment, evidently feeling that he had said more than he should to this man who, after all, was a stranger. Then he snorted a reckless oath.

"Yuh may be a stranger, Hatfield, but yuh're a white man, too, or I never seen one," he declared. "So I'll tell yuh. I got into trouble down *manana* way. There was a pretty little Mex gal I was interested in—liked her awful much. Well, there was a rich jigger down there, too, feller that owned a mine and claimed to be a white man. He—well, he had a eye for pretty gals. He give that particular little gal a job of workin' for him and —well, he didn't treat her right, that's all. Final roundup of the whole thing was I plugged him dead center. They grabbed me and put me in the calaboose. That feller had friends, like most rich fellers has, and they got a mob together, and a rope. They had busted the door down and was leadin'

me out, with the rope around my neck, when. . . . Well, jest at that minute up comes Don Nicalosa. He warn't wearin' no gun, no knife, no nothin'. But he comes right through that yellin' crowd, kickin' men outa his way like they was jackrabbits.

"He walks up to the hellion that was holdin' the rope, reaches out them long, slim fingers of his, and gets the jigger by the neck. Yuh coulda brushed that jigger's eyeballs off with a fly swisher, they stuck out so. He goes for his gun, and Don Nicalosa takes it away from him without no trouble a-tall. Then he turns them stern eyes of his on that mob and proceeds to tell 'em a few.

"When he had finished, they warn't no mob left to speak of. Don Nick puts me back in the calaboose, and with him and a dozen of them hawk-eyed hellions of his settin' in the courtroom, I gets a fair trial and I'm acquitted in two shakes. Mebbe there's been other times, Hatfield, when a hangin' for me wouldn't a been particular outa order, but that time I didn't have it comin', and I'm shore plumb thankful to the boss for what he did. That's why I come along with him when he headed north."

HATFIELD nodded thoughtfully. What this cowboy had said put still further light on some things for him.

"Seems as though the Don is sorta in favor of orderly law processes," he mused. "Clem, wonder why did he come north? You know?"

Clem shook his red head. "You got me there, Hatfield," he replied. Then he glanced around and lowered his voice. "Jest the same, I gotta a hunch that old mission house on Wirt Slaven's spread had somethin' to do with it."

"How's that, Clem?"

"Well," Clem replied hesitantly, as if not quite sure of what he said, "well, the boss is a feller that spends lots of time readin' books and then thinkin' about them. And sometimes he sets out and looks at the stars for long times and sorta talks to hisself. Him and a old Franciscan priest was mighty close friends down *manana* way, and I got a hunch the priest told him about this here country and that old mission house hereabouts.

"Anyhow, I know Don Nick was shore one heap disappointed when he got here and found Wirt Slaven had already took over the old mission for a ranchhouse. For some reason or other, the Don wanted that particular place almighty bad. Gosh knows why —I don't—but you can't tell about educated fellers like him. Sometimes they might have reasons for some things the rest of us don't know nothin' about, and sometimes I jest figger they get sorta tetched in the head and have queer notions. Me, I wouldn't wanta live there in that mission house. They say the darned place is haunted!"

Hatfield thought most soberly concerning this attitude of the Cross G riders and their conviction that serious trouble between the spreads was but a matter of time. He wondered if a like feeling existed among the men of the other outfits of the Valley, and determined to find out. If it did, a serious cattle war was in the making, one that must be prevented at all costs.

"There's been some right nasty killin's over in that Ghost Valley section of the Big Bend," grim old Captain Bill McDowell had told his ace man, the Lone Wolf, prior to Hatfield's long ride from Ranger headquarters. "Folks over there are writin' for a troop of Rangers, per usual. But we shore ain't got no troop to spare right now, even if they was needed, which I figger they ain't. Ride over there, Jim, and bring in the hellions that's kickin' up the bobbery."

With which Captain Bill had dismissed the matter from his mind. Hatfield had ridden west, and had found himself in the midst of something much more serious and mysterious than either he or Captain Bill had anticipated.

But, judging from the sunny light in the Lone Wolf's green eyes, the prospect was not altogether displeasing. He worked with the Cross G riders, listened to their talk and

watched their moves. But what he could not guess was that at the same time, other eyes watched with interest every move of his companions—and of himself.

The day finally came when Hatfield managed to get onto the north range by himself. In company with Clem, Felipe Acosta, and several others, he had combed the brakes until a sizable herd had been collected, a voluable addition to a shipping herd Don Nicalosa was getting together.

RALPHO, the foreman, had given orders that as many steers as possible be hazed out of their hole-ups on the north range, and the boys had camped out there the previous night. They had been busy now since sunup, and with good results.

"I figger we might as well run this batch down valley," Clem observed as they ate their noonday meal.

"Good idea," Hatfield agreed. "You and the boys get 'em movin' and I'll have another little look-see up that last draw. Might hit onto a huddle up there."

Clem nodded, for Don Nicalosa had given out the instructions that Hatfield would act as an assistant to Ralpho, making decisions in the foreman's absence. Felipe Acosta said nothing, but there was a speculative light in his burning eyes as he tightened his cinches.

In short order the herd got under way. Hatfield waved his hand to Clem, wheeled the chunky bay he was riding—he preferred not to risk Goldy's legs at range work on this rough terrain — and headed up the valley.

As he rode, the valley narrowed until it became a true canyon down which the little river rushed, growling against banks of stone. They were sheer, those dark walls, and it was anywhere from fifty to seventy feet to the hurrying water from their broken rim. Hatfield rode slowly along the lip of stone, his eyes seeking a possible crossing, and finding none.

The canyon walls drew closer and closer together, and a decided overhang began to evince as the Ranger proceeded north. At length the cliffs almost met, far overhead, and Hatfield rode beneath gigantic masses of black stone that seemed to cling to the parent walls with a precarious grip.

"If they ever come down, they'd shore play hob with this gorge," he mused. "Fill it from bottom to top, dam up the crick, and raise the devil generally."

Rounding the long sweep of the bend, he perceived the source of the river. Great volumes of water boiled from beneath the black cliff near the sheer end wall of the canyon. He measured the end wall with a practiced eye, noting its serrated, sharp-edged crest, and the knowledge of geology he had gained during the two years of his engineering course in college helped him to arrive at a conclusion.

"Betcha money that end wall is sheer on the other side and drops down to a level a sight lower than on this side," he told the bay horse, much as he was accustomed to commune with Goldy. "Not over thick, either, I got a notion. Wouldn't be no great chore a-tall to break a way through there and mebbe open up a trail to the north which would be a heap sight shorter to the railroad town than the one that runs past Saba.

"Might not be a bad idea to look the situation over and have a little talk with Don Nick. Mebbe he's missin' a bet here. A shorter route for his drives to the railroad would mean money in his pocket."

He studied the terrain some more, and came to a conclusion.

"That side wall to the west ain't impossible for a good hoss to make it to the top by a lot of zigzaggin.' Ought to be able to get the lay of the land from up there. Got a notion to give it a whirl, particular as they shore ain't any way across that darn river up here, as I'd hoped there would be."

HE gazed speculatively up the sloping western wall of the canyon, and as he did, his quick eye caught a glimpse of movement in the growth near the crest. Of movement

and a sudden shifting gleam.

Instantly he hurled himself sideward and down, and even as his off foot left the stirrup, there was a sullen thud, the bay gave a scream of agony and leaped convulsively into the air.

The convulsive leap was the poor brute's last movement of life. Shot through and through, he went down in a floundering heap, stiffened, and was still. Hatfield, writhing clear, landed on hands and knees, with the vicious crack of the unseen rifle still ringing in his ears. He flattened out, hugging the ground, peering toward the crest.

Again the rifle spoke, and a slug whined past. Another shot showered him with rock fragments, and still another hissed past his ear like the stroke of an angry snake. Instinctively he reached for his guns, then dropped his hands. The distance was too great for anything like effective pistol shooting, and the smoke of his Colts would only serve as a mark for the drygulchers in the growth. The lighter rig he had used on the bay was not provided with a saddle-boot, and his big Winchester was at the ranchhouse.

Another slug yelled past. Hatfield spotted the puff of smoke this time. It was some distance down from the crest of the slope. The attackers were creeping closer.

"Can't stand much more of this," he muttered, and arrived at an instant decision.

He leaped to his feet and raced down the canyon, swerving and ducking and zigzagging.

CHAPTER XIII

Killer Guns

EXCITED yells and a blaze of gunfire sounded from the growth on the slope. Bullets stormed past Hatfield, kicking up puffs of dust at his feet, fanning his cheeks with their deadly breath. One struck the heel of his boot and the drygulchers whooped with triumph as the Ranger went over and over like a plugged rabbit. Dizzy and gasping, he staggered to his feet, unharmed aside from bruises and having had most of the breath knocked out of him. And even as he reeled erect he heard the crashing of horses in the growth above. The drygulchers were riding to the kill.

There was nothing to do but run for it and hope to find some spot where he could hole up and make a stand. He raced along the lip of the river bank, with the black water snarling and hissing seventy feet below. When he reached the sweeping bend he had rounded shortly before, for the moment he was protected from the bullets of the pursuit, but only for an instant, as he quite well knew.

On he sped, catching his second wind now, and gaining on the pursuers, who had not yet reached the canyon floor. A moment more, however, and he heard the solid thud of racing irons on the rocks behind. Now it would be but a matter of minutes!

He swerved around the final jut of the bend and slid to a halt, rocking back on his heels, hands flying to his guns. Less than a dozen feet distant a horseman barred the way.

Hatfield's big Colts leaped from their holsters. The right-hand one jutted forward, hammer flying back. Then with a frantic twist of his wrist he spun the muzzle upward and the slug whined viciously toward the sky.

The rider of the horse in front of him was a girl!

And around the turn, with guns blazing, with shouted curses, roared the pursuit.

Bullets screeched past the Ranger. One burned his cheek. Another grazed his shoulder. Then the girl's horse squealed wildly and reared high. A slug had plowed a deep and bloody furrow along his sensitive nose. He wheeled, apparently with all four feet in the air, and his rider was hurled from the saddle like a stone from a sling.

Straight for the jagged rocks of the canyon floor she whirled headfirst as Hatfield raced forward. He

caught her before she struck the rocks, caught the full force of her plunging body against his broad chest and gripped her with convulsive arms.

The Ranger was swept from his feet by the force of the impact. He rolled over and over, shielding his gasping burden from the stones with his own body. In what appeared to be a continuous movement he staggered to his feet and faced the charging drygulchers, who now were less than a hundred yards distant.

For an instant, in amazement at the unexpected development, they had held their fire. But almost as instantly their guns cracked again and the slugs yelled past the Lone Wolf and the frightened girl.

Hatfield whirled, his face bleak as chiseled stone.

"They don't figure to leave no witnesses," he growled, shielding the girl with his body, for there was that in their grim determination which told him not even a woman was safe from them.

A long stride and he was on the brink of the river, with a sheer drop of seventy feet to the tossing water and the fangs of black stone below. There was but one thing to do—and he did it.

WITHOUT hesitation he took the leap, gripping the girl tight against his breast, every muscle tense and rigid.

Down they rushed—down, down—the wind shrieking past, the black fangs of stone rushing up to meet them with incredible speed. They grazed a jagged mass, missing its deadly dagger points by inches, and struck the water with a sullen plunge.

Down, down again! Down through cruel green depths whose icy, numbing clutch was like cold fire that seared their flesh. Down, down! Seemingly never to rise again. Hatfield's lungs were bursting. A red-hot band of iron bound his laboring chest. Another encircled his throbbing temples. A bubbling red mist boiled and curdled before his staring eyes.

The girl, unconscious now, was a terrible dead weight that dragged him down and down. Without that dragging weight he might rise again from those cruel, swirling depths, rise to the sweet air for which his tortured lungs clamored. Instinctively his arms slackened their grip. Then his big jaw set grimly, and he tightened the grasp of one arm about her slender form, while with the other he frantically beat the stubborn water.

And now they were rising. Slowly, slowly, the cold green of the water was lightening. There was a glancing of swift gleams along the edges of the bubbling mist, a lessening of the pressure against his agonized chest. Up and up, with the warmth of the sunlight almost to be felt. And then—a surging plunge and they broke surface.

Hatfield gulped great draughts of life-giving air that stung and burned his lungs like fire. But with each convulsive gasp his strength surged back, the numbness left his limbs, the bubbling mist thinned and dissipated, and he could see. In his ears, now free from the water, rang whoops and yells, and a crackle of gunfire. The drygulchers were shooting at him from the lip of the bank. Bullets chugged sullenly into the water or glanced from the surface with a thin whine.

He drew a deep breath and dived again. Covering the girl's mouth and nose with one hand, he stayed beneath as long as he could, letting the swift current whirl them downstream. When he broke surface, the yells and the shooting sounded fainter, and the bullets did not come so close. He glanced over his shoulder, saw the drygulchers riding the broken ground as swiftly as they dared, and then the stream whirled him around a bend and they were lost to view.

The danger from the killers' bullets was past, but Hatfield still had troubles a-plenty. The stream ran like a mill-race and the water was icy cold. He battled the current as best he could with his single unoccupied hand, holding the girl's face above water, shielding her body from the rocks past which they scraped from

time to time. The walls of the gorge still towered above them and the water washed against the base of their sheer loom. There was no possible foothold by which he could scramble onto dry land.

DRAINED by the cold and by his mighty exertions, even Jim Hatfield's iron strength began to fail. The mist was back before his eyes and the hot band was again tightening about his chest.

The girl stirred in his arms. She was regaining consciousness and might at any moment present an added problem of fright and struggle. He grimly gripped her tight and strained his eyes ahead. They had come miles down the swift stream, and surely the walls of the gorge should fall away soon.

He went under, swallowed a mouthful of water and came up strangling. The girl cried out, choked and gasped. And then the sunlight suddenly beat strongly on the black water, turning it to glinting turquoise and glancing silver. The dark gorge walls were lowering and drawing back. A little strip of pebbly beach replaced the sheer drop of water-washed stone.

Hatfield swam for it, stroking feebly with his last remaining strength. He went under again, broke surface, made a last convulsive attempt. His feet struck bottom and he sloshed and reeled through the shallows to fall gasping upon the pebbles and the sand.

Dimly he realized that the girl was bending over him, stroking his wet hair back from his forehead, staring at him from wide blue eyes, her own hair, the color of ripe cornsilk clustering about her creamily sun-golden little face in tight rings from whose beauty not even the icy water could detract.

Jim Hatfield closed his eyes and for the moment let everything go. . . .

It was the girl's voice, a liquid, throaty voice, soft and vibrant, that aroused him. He opened his eyes, grinned drowsily up at her, and then stretched his long arms. He sat up, shaking the water from his hair, and abruptly glanced back up the stream. The sunny-haired girl quickly interpreted his glance.

"I don't think they'll follow us this far," she said. "We are on Dad's lower range, now, and some of the boys are apt to be close by. They would hear any shooting and come to see what it was all about."

"Yore dad's range?" Hatfield asked dazedly.

"Yes," she told him confidently. "The Bar S."

"Then Wirt Slaven is yore dad?" the Ranger asked again.

"Yes," she nodded. "I'm Rena Slaven, and I want to thank you for saving my life a couple of times." She shuddered. "I thought I was done for when Paint threw me. I can still see those sharp rocks hurtling toward my face. Who were those men who were shooting at you, and why were they trying to kill you?"

"Can't say for shore on either count," Hatfield replied soberly, pulling off her wet boots and pouring out the water. "Mebbe they took me for somebody else, and then mebbe they jest didn't like my looks."

Rena Slaven, seated on the ground, drew her knees up under her round, white little chin, locked her slim arms around them and regarded him speculatively as he handed her back her small boots, then got busy emptying his own boots.

"There are certainly a lot of things for which there seem to be no explanation happening hereabout of late," she remarked. "Who are you, and whom do you work for?"

Hatfield supplied his name. "I'm ridin' for Don Nicalosa Gomez," he added.

THE girl's eyes were dark and pensive as she continued to regard him through her silken lashes.

"Don Nicalosa," she repeated softly. "*His* friend."

"Whose friend?" Hatfield asked wonderingly.

The girl reached for her boots and began drawing them on.

"Ramon Estrada's," she said quiet-

ly. She shivered as a wind moaned down the canyon. "Don't you think we should be moving? I'm getting cold, and it's quite a walk to the ranchhouse. What happened to your boot heel?"

"Hunk of lead one of those hellions throwed at me knocked it off," Hatfield replied briefly. "That one came too close for comfort."

The girl shuddered again, closed her eyes an instant, then opened them again.

"Decidedly," she agreed, "and there's a welt on your cheek, too. Haven't you any notion who those men were? They certainly came nearer to killing you than I would have cared for, myself."

"No, not for shore," Hatfield told her, adding frankly: "I might make a coupla guesses, but I figger only one of the two would be right, so I'm not makin' them—jest yet."

CHAPTER XIV

The Fiery Cross

LIFTING the girl lightly to her feet, Hatfield started with her on the long tramp down the canyon.

They didn't have to walk all the way in their wet, uncomfortable boots, however. Before long they heard the sound of fast hoofs pounding up the valley. A little later a couple of cowboys, their faces strained and anxious, dashed around a clump of stone. They gave a shout of relief as they saw the girl.

"Yore hoss come along wild-bent-for-election with a slit in his nose and without you in the hull, Miss Rena," one exclaimed, "and we thought for shore—" He shot a questioning glance at Hatfield. "You shore yuh're all right, Miss Rena?"

"Yes," the girl said, in her voice a note of gratitude, "thanks to this gentleman. I was thrown by Paint, then went into the creek, but he pulled me out."

The cowboy stared but asked no further questions.

"Reckon yuh-all better get up behind Tate and me," he advised. "We'll get yuh to the ranch and some dry duds in a jiffy."

Hatfield nodded, but the girl vetoed the plan.

"Mr. Hatfield and I are both wet," she said. "We might as well ride together, then you boys will not get wet, too. Give us your horse, Clark, and you get up behind Tate."

"Shore," replied the cowboy, with a grin, slipping from the hull and holding the bridle of his big rawboned roan until Hatfield should mount.

Stifling a grin himself, the Ranger adjusted the stirrup straps to his greater length of limb, and mounted. Leaning down, he swung the girl lightly up in front of him, cradling her in his long arms.

"Keep yuh warmer this way," he explained, "than if yuh rode behind."

Rena Slaven nodded, and offered no objections when he snuggled her up against his broad chest.

With the double-mounted cowboys leading the way, they rode swiftly down the valley, the big roan apparently not in the least affected by his double load. In little more than an hour the towering walls of the Bar S ranchhouse which once had been Fray Marcos' mission house showed in its grove of great oaks, the offsprings of those trees which the long-dead hands of patient monks had planted so far away in the dim and distant past.

Hatfield's lips pursed in a soundless whistle as he viewed the huge, grim buildings. The sun was low in the west now and its reddish light cast a fiery glow upon the ponderous, roughly hewn ageless blocks of stone that formed the walls. High, embrasured windows pierced the mighty walls at irregular intervals, forming an involved and apparently pointless pattern of staring eye sockets. The crests of the walls were crenelated in the fortress style of the stern age in which they had risen, and frowned down upon the peaceful green of grass and leaf.

"No wonder folks think the darn place is haunted," Hatfield said aloud.

"Sometimes I think it is, myself," the girl declared, as they rode up and dismounted before the great arched door. "At times I get the strangest oppressed feeling, a sense of suffocation, as if I were shut tight between great walls in utter darkness and utter silence, hopeless and dying. I have awakened at night with that feeling, to lie listening for a call that should come from somewhere, for a message I feel someone is trying to deliver. It is the eeriest thing! It never happened to me at any time before we came here."

THE Ranger did not smile. He could understand what the girl said, for years in this country of mystery had taught him not to take lightly any "messages" that might seem to come from the unknown.

"Associations and places cause feelings like that sometimes," he said. "Yore imagination dwellin' upon the things yuh have heard about this place, mebbe it is. Yuh've heard the story of the curse them old monks was supposed to put on this place, of course?"

"Y-yes." She hesitated. "He—Ramon Estrada told me."

"Fine feller, Estrada," Hatfield remarked. "The high-class blood of that old Moorish prince and his Spanish princess shore come out strong in him."

The girl darted him a swift glance, a grateful glance, Hatfield felt.

"Do you really think so?" she asked, and there was a singing note in her voice. But she did not wait for him to answer, as she ran toward the door.

"But hurry in," she exclaimed. "I'll get you some of my father's clothes. He's almost as big as you, though hardly so tall, still I imagine you can make out until your things dry." She glanced around at him, her eyes twinkling. "Hurry! Do you want to have that curse settle on you and cause you to get your death of cold?"

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FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

They both laughed at that, but as she hastened away to procure him dry garments, the smile died on the Ranger's lips and his strange eyes grew somber.

"I'm beginnin' to understand what Ramon Estrada meant when he spoke about the curse settlin' on him double strong," he mused. "Well, begins to look like it's up to me to send that curse back where it belongs. Curses haven't got any business settlin' on nice young folks. There's plenty cantankerous old sinners in the world for 'em to work on, much as they please, without that."

Old Wirt Slaven's garments fitted Hatfield after a fashion, and they were at least warm and dry. He donned them in an upper chamber and gave his wet clothes to a wrangler to dry out for him. Then he descended to the big main room once more.

The girl was awaiting him. She had changed her wet riding outfit for something feminine and comfortable, and Hatfield thought her even more charming than before, with her sun-golden hair soft and rippling, and the color glowing in her cheeks.

HE paused and smiled down from his great height, his teeth flashing white in his bronzed face, and little lines crinkling at the corners of his long eyes, which now were the warm green of sunny seas under a summer sky.

Rena Slaven's breath caught a little, and there was a glow in her blue eyes as she answered his smile. Then she sighed, and motioned him back to a chair.

"Father isn't back from town yet," she explained. "We'll eat as soon as he gets here. I hope he hurries. I'm starved."

"Takin' long swims sorta works on yuh thataway," Hatfield agreed, with that broad, amiable grin of his. "I figger I could handle a warmed steer or two myself about now."

With the elasticity of youth and perfect physical condition, they had both thrown off the effects of their recent hazardous and exhausting experience.

The hot sun was setting behind the Robber Hills and its level rays were pouring reddish flame through the high windows. Suddenly an answering gleam shot from the far wall of the room. Hatfield glanced that way and saw that it was reflected from a large iron cross deeply imbedded in the stone. The girl saw his glance, and her hand touched his arm, tightening on it.

"Watch!" she exclaimed. "It's the strangest thing. I cleaned and polished that old crucifix recently, and of late I've been noticing how the sunlight reflects from it. It's positively eerie. Watch now!"

The reddish gleam, which beat back from the top of the upright, gradually died. An instant later a like gleam shot from the tip of the left arm. It, too, died in turn and was replaced by a baleful glow from the base of the upright. This darkened and a last red ray shot from the tip of the right arm of the horizontal.

"It's uncanny!" breathed the girl. "Only of late has it been doing that. I never noticed anything of the sort when we first came here."

Hatfield turned and stared at the unevenly spaced windows just below the lofty ceiling. He studied them carefully for a moment, with his engineer-trained eyes.

"The sun shines through first one and then another of the windows," he explained then. "It strikes upon the arms in turn and is reflected. I imagine the angle of the settin' sun ain't jest right at all times of the year, which is why yuh haven't noticed it until lately. Funny that them windows should be spaced that way."

"You're certainly clever to figure that out so quickly," the girl said admiringly. She gazed at the darkening windows. "I wonder if they were pierced that way by design."

"What would be the reason for it?" asked the Ranger. "Nope, I reckon it was jest chance and worked out that way, although it might have been done because of some especial significance attached to the cross. Hard to tell how them old fellers' minds worked back in them days so long

gone. They had their own ideas, like buildin' a mission way up here in what was a wilderness and uninhabited except for a few Indians. Mebbe they had an idea we don't know nothin' a-tall about—and mebbe they didn't."

Old Wirt Slaven rode up just then and the subject was dropped as Rena and the Ranger went out to meet him.

Back in the big living room, old Wirt shook hands with Hatfield a second time after his daughter had finished her story of the afternoon's events.

"Any time yuh ever need somebody to stick by yuh, feller, I'm yore man," he declared with undoubted sincerity. Then his brow furrowed, and he frowned heavily. "Now who the blue blazin' tarnation could them dry-gulchin' hellions have been? If it warn't for the fact yuh're workin' for Gomez, I'd say him and his tribe was at the bottom of it . . . Yuh shore yuh ain't got in bad with some of his saddle-colored Mex devils?"

THAT speculation was hitting a little too close to a certain truth for Hatfield to care to discuss it. A fleeting vision of Felipe Acosta's lowering face swam before his eyes for an instant. And he admitted to himself: "Might be—can't tell. But jest the same it don't make sense."

Aloud, however, he admitted none of his suspicions.

At the urging of old Wirt and Rena, Hatfield spent the night at the Bar S ranchhouse. For a long time before going to bed, he sat smoking and gazing out of one of the embrasured windows. A gibbous moon hung low in the sky and cast a lurid, unreal light over the desert and the hills. A wind moaned about the grim walls of the old mission and struck a sad music from the rustling leaves of the venerable oaks. Somewhere an owl quavered a weird plaint, and from the crest of the canyon wall a coyote wailed desolate reply.

Hatfield thought of Rena Slaven's words, of her confession of how the very atmosphere of the old mission made her feel, and a feeling of oppression, of utter loneliness, of hopeless despair settled down upon him like a clammy cloud. For no reason at all, he felt utterly cut off from the bright world of life and laughter and happiness and love. He was alone, utterly alone, deserted by his fellows, who had vanished away into shadows from which they could not be recalled, alone in a black void whose ebon shades pressed in upon him like ponderous encroaching walls.

And from somewhere a voice was calling, a persistent, urging voice that repeated over and over again some unintelligible message. It was a message he could *feel*—as if almost he could hear the words.

CHAPTER XV

Government Ally

WITH a start, Jim Hatfield sat up straight, realizing that he had been drowsily nodding. The eerie feeling vanished, and before him lay the peaceful scene of the desert and the hills, all mellowed and softened by the silvery moonlight.

"Whew!" he exclaimed under his breath. "No wonder folks think this place is haunted, if that's a sample of the dreams a feller has here! Now I know what that girl was trying to say about how she felt, anyhow."

He stood up, stretching his long arms above his head, and gazed once more out the window, his dark brows drawing together until the concentration furrow was deep between them, a sure sign that the Lone Wolf was pondering something seriously.

"Not much to go on." He spoke his thoughts aloud. "Not much to build a case on, but it's a start. Not much—the way a jigger strikes a match!"

When Jim Hatfield returned to the Bar G spread the next morning, Don Nicalosa shook his finely shaped head after Hatfield had recounted the previous day's happenings.

"It seems that anyone who strays

into this valley finds enemies," he remarked. "Perhaps, though, it was nothing more than a rustling outfit you interrupted in the performance of some nefarious act. Perhaps they thought you had observed something which you had not."

"I've thought of that angle," Hatfield admitted, "but what in blazes would they be doing up there in the hills, 'way back at the head of the canyon?"

He mentioned his thought concerning a trail via the head of the canyon, and how advantageous it would be. Don Nicalosa was interested.

"Yes," said the owner of the Cross G, "that might be feasible. The end wall of the canyon is of no great thickness. I noted that fact one day when I rode along the crest of the western wall. There is a steep but negotiable slope on the other side that leads into another, a narrow and arid canyon. What is beyond that I do not know. Perhaps that canyon boxes, or the slopes beyond are not practical for cattle. I will look into it later. Right now I am fully occupied getting the trail herd together. I have obligations to meet and the marketing of that herd is most important to me."

When Hatfield rode to town a little later, he found that the story of his adventure in the canyon had preceded him. One of the Ranger's first calls was on Ramon Estrada, who shook hands with great warmth.

"Thank you, my friend," he said earnestly. "Thank you more than words can express."

HATFIELD nodded his understanding, though Rena Slaven was not mentioned by name.

"By the way, I don't think I'd take that curse business so very serious," he said. "I don't think yuh got over much to worry about, Estrada."

"I have plenty," Estrada replied bitterly. "Her father is a wealthy rancher, honored and respected. I, while not exactly penniless, have little enough of this world's goods. And the business of a saloon keeper is not of the best, but I have no other."

"If yuh jest had all them jewels that belonged to the princess, yuh could get into another business," Hatfield remarked jocularly.

Ramon Estrada did not smile.

"Yes," he said simply. "They were reputedly of great worth. But they are gone forever. The old monks hid them well."

"You really think they hid them, then?" Hatfield's eyebrows went up. He had not been inclined to take that story seriously.

"Yes," Estrada said, with conviction. "Doubtless one of their Indian converts slipped from the mission with them while the battle raged, and stowed them away in some secret place. Then when the fathers died in the battle and none were left alive, the convert would not have dared touch the sacred relics, even did he realize their value. When he died, doubtless the secret of the hiding place died with him, and the jewels will remain forever in their secret place, unless someone stumbles upon them by accident. As you doubtless know, the Southwest is full of such stories of hidden hoards. Who knows how much is true and how much is false?"

After leaving Estrada, Hatfield went to Bigboy Malarkey's livery stable. Bigboy was not there. Instead, a world-weary veteran of some fifteen summers greeted the Ranger.

"He's over to the post office—mail jest come in on the stage from the railroad," the veteran replied to Hatfield's query.

"Gone for the mail, eh?" Hatfield nodded.

The veteran shook his head, wearily poking a pebble with the big toe of one bare foot.

"Nope," he said in a tired voice. "He's gone to sort it out. He's postmaster of this here town."

Hatfield's black brows drew together slightly, and for a moment he stood in thought. Then he asked, and received directions for locating the post office.

"Yeah, I'm postmaster, well as stablekeeper," Bigboy told Hatfield when he entered the clapboard shack

which housed the dignity of the United States Mail. "There ain't over much to do and I got the time. Congressman Ike Garney and me is sorta friends—I shot his little finger off with a hoss pistol when we was kids together—and he got me the job when they put a office here. Yuh expectin' mail? Come on in behind the gratin' and set, while I go over these letters. The boys will be droppin' in for 'em this evenin'."

Hatfield entered and 'set.' He regarded Malarkey from his level green eyes and arrived at a conclusion about something he had been mulling over ever since he had first met the little man.

"Bigboy," he said softly, "I've got something to show you."

MALARKEY cocked an inquiring eyebrow in his direction as Hatfield fumbled with his broad belt. His one eye bulged as the Lone Wolf drew from a cunningly contrived secret pocket in the leather a gleaming object which he cupped in his palm.

Bigboy Malarkey stared at the glittering silver star set on a silver circle.

"A Ranger!" he exclaimed in an awed voice. "Feller, yuh're a Texas Ranger! Well, I'd oughta knowed it! Now there'll be a stop put to all this promiscuous devil raisin' that's been goin' on hereabouts."

"Mebbe," Hatfield agreed soberly. "I'm gonna do my best, but it's beginnin' to look like it's a little worse'n I thought at first, and I'll need a little help."

"You jest say the word and anythin' I can do is as good as done," Bigboy exclaimed heartily.

"There is somethin' yuh can do," Hatfield told him promptly. "Somethin' you can do that nobody else can. It's this—"

Bigboy pursed his lips as he listened. Then he shook his head hesitantly.

"Tamperin' with the Government mails in any way is ticklish business," he remarked, when Hatfield had finished, "but if a Ranger says it's all right, I reckon it is."

"I only want to see the return address on envelopes addressed to them fellers I jest mentioned to yuh," Hatfield pointed out. "That don't mean openin' letters or readin' 'em."

"One or t'other of 'em gets mail most ev'ry day," Bigboy muttered, burrowing into a mailsack. "Uh-huh, here's one right here, and it's got a return address on it, too. Looks like a business letter. Return address is printed onto it."

Hatfield took the bulky envelope, his eyes glowing with satisfaction. He studied the neatly printed return address, carefully memorizing it. Then he returned the letter to Bigboy and stood up.

"Thanks, Bigboy," he told Malarkey. "Now I'm gonna take a little ride. Be seein' yuh. And you keep a tight lip."

When Hatfield left Saba, he rode the thirty-odd miles to the railroad town. There he entered the telegraph office, and after a few minutes low conversation with the excited operator, who was sworn to secrecy by the rules of his company, sent a lengthy and carefully worded telegram to Captain Bill McDowell at Ranger headquarters. Then he went to bed.

It was late the following afternoon when he received a reply from Captain McDowell, a reply that was almost letter length and which caused his black brows to draw together. Captain Bill's wire concluded:

FURTHER DETAILS BY LETTER WHEN I GET THEM

"It's beginnin' to tie up—a little bit," Hatfield mused as he rode back to Saba. "But the whole business still don't make sense. What in blazes are they after, anyhow?"

CHAPTER XVI

Stampede Toward Death

DON NICALOSA got his trail herd together at last. It was a big herd and almost stripped the

Cross G of all its salable cattle.

"I will buy more later in the year," the Don told Hatfield. "Right now I badly need money with which to meet obligations I have contracted in Mexico. The market is good at present and I have a purchaser who will pay the current price upon delivery. Tomorrow we will start the drive."

They started at dawn. Accompanying Don Nicalosa who took personal charge of the drive were Hatfield, Clem, the Texan, and half a score of the Cross G *vaqueros*. They passed Saba and pushed the herd into the hills at an easy pace, so as not to run valuable fat off the dogies.

They made camp far up in the hills that night and started again the following morning. Now they were traveling down the long northern slopes of the Ladrones. Beyond was rolling, arid country, upon which fed a few scanty herd, owned chiefly by Mexican ranchers.

It was with a feeling of relief that they left the grim fastnesses of the sinister Ladrones where it was generally conceded that about anything could happen.

"I had feared that some attempt might be made against this valuable herd," Don Nicalosa confided to Hatfield. "Now I feel much easier, since we are in open country once more."

"Jest the same, we won't take any chances, even now," the Ranger said firmly. "We're not to town yet."

But he knew that the vigilance of the carefree *vaqueros* had greatly relaxed. They felt that they were "out of the woods" now, and with nothing more to worry about. That made need for his own continued watchfulness all the greater.

They passed down the last long slope and onto the level range. Ahead were clumps of growth, low rises, shallow swales. The cattle moved forward sedately and required little urging. The *vaqueros* chatted gaily in musical Spanish, anticipating the night of pleasure ahead at the railroad town. The trail curved around a rambling grove of scrub oaks, with a long slope covered with dense chaparral rising on the left.

Suddenly from around the curve in the trail sounded a low drumming of hoofs, punctuated with the bleating of frightened cattle. The *vaqueros* pulled up, listening.

"What the devil now?" wondered Clem, the Texan, startled.

Louder grew the drumming of hoofs, the excited bawling. The trail herd began to mill. And around the bend burst a sea of tossing horns and wild eyes.

"Look out!" yelled Clem. "By the jumpin' Jehosophat, it's a full-size stampede!"

Instantly there was mad confusion. The stampede that seemed to have come from nowhere hit the trail herd head-on, plowing into it, hurling steers aside, bowling them over. The panic was contagious and the trail herd instantly took fright. Above the bleating and bawling and shouting and cursing boomed Jim Hatfield's deep-toned roar:

"It's a trap! Look out! Off yore broncs! Take cover! It's a trap!"

LIKE an echo to his words the chaparral-covered slope crashed and rattled with gunfire. Hatfield had a blurred vision of Clem slumping to the ground, of Don Nicalosa reeling in his saddle. Then the world exploded in a blaze of jagged flame and prodigious roaring that was swallowed up in wave on wave of icy blackness. . . .

Jim Hatfield came back to consciousness to the accompaniment of a blazing headache and a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach. He opened his eyes, got a blinding stab of pain and quickly closed them again.

For a moment he fought a deadly nausea that gripped him, not in the least realizing, and not much caring, where he was or what had happened. Then the waves of pain and the gagging swelling of his throat eased, and he cautiously opened his eyes once more and glanced about.

He was seated in a chair, and he quickly realized that the ropes passed tightly around his arms and body bound him to the heavy back. Facing him at a little distance was Don

Nicalosa, similarly bound, his face pale and bloody.

Something else faced the Ranger. It was the black muzzle of a gun, a gun that was lashed firmly to the center post of a rickety cabin. By degrees he recognized the gun as one of his own Colts. And lashed to the post a little above the first was his second six, its muzzle tilted slightly downward in the opposite direction.

Wonderingly, Hatfield's gaze followed the direction of its barrel and saw that it was aimed squarely at Don Nicalosa's broad breast, just as the lower gun was aimed at his own.

A chuckle sounded and, glancing to one side, Hatfield saw a bandanna-masked man sitting in a chair that was tilted back comfortably against the wall. In one muscular hand he held a cocked Colt. The other had just finished rolling a cigarette which he slipped through the mouth hole of his mask. By the way the mask fitted, Hatfield judged that the man wore a beard. His broad-brimmed hat was drawn low.

As Hatfield gazed, he fumbled a match from his pocket, shifted his position and struck it. Holding the flame to the tip of the cigarette, he gazed toward the Ranger. Hatfield watched the proceeding with slightly narrowed eyes and a tightening of his firm mouth. He had seen that peculiar method of lighting a match before—would never forget it!

The man got his cigarette going well, flipped out the match and nodded.

"Come outa it, eh?" he remarked in a rumbling voice, his eyes above the mask studying Hatfield from beneath his low-pulled hat-brim.

Now Hatfield, becoming more aware of his surroundings, noted that there were other men ranged along the wall, all masked with bandannas, and all centering their attention on himself and Don Nicalosa. They said nothing, and the Lone Wolf waited in silence.

FINALLY the man in the chair stood up and stretched his long arms.

"Well, oiler," he said, addressing Don Nicalosa, "yore cattle are headed to where they'll do the most good, and yore saddle-colored hellions are cashed in, or chased back to town. There's no danger of interruption, so we might as well get on with our little show. I have somethin' extra special fixed up for you two, somethin' that'll make folks whistle when they find what's left of yuh. All right, boys, get goin'."

He twirled the cocked gun about his forefinger and stood alert and watchful while the men along the wall approached the bound pair. Two seized Hatfield's right leg and hoisted his foot from the floor until it was on a level with his eyes. A third man quickly noosed a thin but strong cord tightly about his ankle and pitched the loose end over a beam that ran from eave to eave of the unceilinged cabin. He noosed the free end and deftly slipped it over the trigger of the gun which pointed toward Don Nicalosa's breast.

At the same time, three other men served the *hidalgo* in like manner. With the difference that the loose end of the cord which looped his raised ankle was fastened to the trigger of the gun which pointed at Hatfield's heart.

Then they stepped back.

"Don't let yore legs down, boys," cautioned the big masked man with the gun, as he stepped toward the post. "If yuh do it'll be jest too bad. I'm cocking these two hoglegs, and if yuh let yore legs down yuh'll tighten the strings and pull the triggers. Of course if one of yuh gets real tired he can let his leg down and shoot his pardner, but when his pardner falls over with a slug through him, he's pretty shore to shoot the other gun and get even. Now we're gonna leave yuh, and yuh can play the little game out between yuh. The hombre whose leg gives out first will get first shot. *Adios!*"

With a rasping chuckle he turned to the door of the cabin. His companions filed out after him and a moment later Hatfield heard the thud of horses' hoofs dying swiftly into the distance.

CHAPTER XVII

Death for Death

CALLOUSLY left alone in the cabin, with their muscles already beginning to ache with strain, Hatfield and Don Nicalosa stared at one another.

"Senor!" gasped Don Nicalosa, his pallid face streaming sweat. "What is to be done?"

"I don't know—yet," Hatfield gritted in reply. "Hang on, feller, and think—think fast! We got to do somethin'! We jest plain must!"

His own mind was racing, formulating plan after plan, and as swiftly discarding them as futile. He tugged at his bonds with all his great strength, until the cords cut deeply into his arms, but to no avail. His chair rocked perilously and he relaxed. If the chair should overturn, the jerk of the string would fire the gun which would send a bullet crashing into Don Nicalosa's breast. As it was, struggling with the bonds, it was all he could do to keep his foot elevated.

"If I'd only been forkin' Goldy today and he was hangin' around somewheres, mebbe he could do somethin'," Hatfield muttered. "That hoss is almost human and has got me outa more'n one tight place."

But Goldy, with a tender hoof that needed some attention, was taking it easy in the Cross G stables, totally unaware that there was any special need for his services.

Don Nicalosa was panting with strain, his leg trembled, lowered a trifle, and was quickly thrust upward again.

"Take it easy as yuh can," Hatfield warned him. "Let yore leg down as far as yuh can, and then ease it up again. That'll sorta rest it."

His own muscles were quivering and throbbing, but he grimly endured the torture and held his booted foot rigid.

In spite of all his efforts the foot shook a little. The spur jingled with a tiny, bell-like note. Hatfield's gaze centered on it absently. He never wore spurs when riding his own golden sorrel but he had donned these because the horse he had been riding on the drive was a stubborn, hard-mouthed animal that would not work without them. He had borrowed them from one of the *vaqueros*, who, according to Mexican custom, had filed the rowels sharp.

Sharp! The points were knife-edged! Hatfield had refrained from using them on the contrary bronc as much as possible because of their sharpness. His green eyes blazed at the realization.

"Hold it, feller," he called to Don Nicalosa. "Hold it jest a minute longer. I believe I got an idea that'll work!"

He gripped the chair seat with the fingers of his bound hands and cautiously raised his left foot from the floor. Raised it until it was on a level with the ankle about which the noose was fastened. Then he twisted his foot sideward, brought the rowel of the left spur against the cord where it rested upon the leather of his boot and began to saw the rowel backward and forward.

IT was slow work, terribly slow, and the strain was terrific. Hatfield's face streamed sweat, his body was wet with it. He shook as with the ague and the veins stood out on his forehead like black ropes.

"Hurry!" gasped Don Nicalosa. "My strength is almost gone!"

The *hidalgo's* face was livid, his pale eyes fairly bulging from their sockets. Blood ran down his chin from where his teeth were clenched in his lower lip. Slowly, slowly, despite his mightiest efforts, his leg came down. The slack in the cord was taken up. It stretched in a straight line from where it noosed the trigger.

Out of the corner of his eye Hatfield saw it. He realized that the tiniest additional pressure would send the hammer down and the heavy slug crashing through his heart. The cord about his ankle was cut and frayed, but it still held. He summoned the

last atom of his strength, held his right leg rigid and raked the sharp points of the rowel hard across the raveling noose.

He felt the steel go through, saw the severed noose drop free and dangle. With a convulsive writhe he hurled his body sideward.

Flame gushed from the black muzzle of the Colt as Don Nicalosa's tortured muscles could stand no more and his leg dropped. The roar of the report blended with the crash of Hatfield's overturned chair on the floor boards. Under the prodigious thrashing and pounding of his powerful body, the chair smashed to kindling wood. Jim Hatfield struggled free from the tangle of ropes and surged to his feet. Panting, he staggered to Don Nicalosa and began to jerk free his bonds. The *hidalgo* slumped against the ropes, all but unconscious. He raised tortured eyes, understood, and a joyous relief flooded his ghostly face.

"My *amigo!*" he gasped. "Now praise be to God for His mercy! I thought I had murdered you!"

With his loaded guns back in their holsters, Hatfield felt a good deal better.

"Let's stick around for a little spell," he suggested to Don Nicalosa when both men were free. "Mebbe them devils will come back to see how their cute little party turned out. I'll tie up that hole in the top of yore shoulder and you can take a look at this bullet crease on the side of my head. It shore knocked the senses outa me for a spell, but I don't figger it did much of anything else. Jest a crease, more'n likely."

They waited, binding up one another's wounds in the meantime, but the wide-loopers with sadistic murder in their souls did not return. Finally Hatfield suggested that they make a start. Both were anxious about the fate of the other men on the drive.

They passed through the sagging door after first cautiously surveying the landscape. They could see quite a distance, but no one was in sight. All that was ahead was a long slope rather thickly grown with chaparral.

WHEN they went outside, Hatfield glanced back at the weather-beaten cabin, which sat half on a shelf of land amid a clump of trees.

"Old prospector's shack—been deserted a long time," he remarked. "Them lobo killers evidently knew jest where to look for it. A smart outfit, all right. Waited until we were out of the hills and would be feeling easier. Rounded up a bunch of stock from somewheres, hid 'em in that grove, and then stampeded them so's they'd smack into our herd and mix things up. Then they cut down on us from where they were holed up in the brush. Yeah, a smart outfit. That was a plumb new idea and they handled it as slick as a greased skunk in an oil barrel. I'm afraid yore herd's gone, Don Nicalosa."

"It is a heavy loss," said the *hidalgo*, shaking his head. "A crippling loss, but I am chiefly concerned about my

[*Turn page*]

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men. Do you think all were killed?"

"I doubt it," Hatfield comforted him. "Chances are most of the boys got in the clear. They scattered soon as they saw you and I were down." He added regretfully: "I saw Clem goin' outa his hull, though. 'Fraid he was done for . . . Well, come on. I figger the trail ought to be down that way and not so far off. We'll head for the railroad town—that's nearest and we can get hosses there. I reckon we'd best hurry, too. It'll be dark soon."

They reached the railroad town, after an arduous tramp, but before they had had their injuries attended to and obtained food, which they sorely needed, Sheriff Tom Cronin, his horse reeking, rode into town at the head of a posse which already had been out after the bushwhackers.

"Some of yore hands made it back to town and told what had happened," he told Don Nicalosa as soon as he saw the *hidalgo*. "Clem was one of 'em. He's got a busted arm and a gash side his head, but yuh can't kill his kind with anything other'n a stretched rope. I got men combin' the hills and tryin' to pick up the trail of that herd, but she's a mighty cold trail by now, and the Border country ain't far off. I come on this way on the chance somebody might know somethin' here in town. Never expected to find you fellers here. Thought for shore yuh was done for. How'd you slide loose from them hellions?"

Don Nicalosa told him all he and Jim Hatfield had gone through, and the tale lost nothing in the telling. The sheriff wagged his grizzled head admiringly at Hatfield.

"Feller, yuh're good!" he applauded. "Yuh'd oughta be a peace officer." He tugged at his mustache viciously and scowled. "That was the dad-blamedest, cold-bloodedest thing I ever heard tell of!" he declared. "Tryin' to make yuh shoot each other thataway."

"Yeah," Hatfield agreed, his green eyes steadily on the sheriff's face. "Yeah, about on a par with other things that has been done in this part of the county of late—like peggin' fellers over ant-hills and crucifyin' 'em on cholla cactuses, and such."

Sheriff Cronin tugged savagely at his mustache some more, but said nothing. There seemed to be nothing he could say, in the face of his not having been able to avenge such outrages by due process of law.

Hatfield and Don Nicalosa finally got back to the Cross G Ranch. There they found that five *vaqueros* had been killed and three others wounded, though none seriously. Clem was prodigiously swathed in bandages, but otherwise fairly chipper, limping about the ranchhouse and swearing in two languages.

"Knocked me outa the hull into a clump of brush alongside the trail," he told Hatfield. "Figgered me as done for, I reckon. I was, purty nigh. That wham on the head sorta paralyzed me for awhile. Couldn't move—which was jest as well, I reckon. Otherwise one of the hellions woulda done me in for shore.

"They run the herd straight up the slope once they got it back together again, after chasin' what boys they was left back toward town. There was a dozen of 'em, or more, all wearin' bandanna masks. The hombre that did the bossin' after the big jigger rode off with you and Don Nick was a short, husky jigger with a sorta hoarse voice. I didn't see no faces, but I heard some of 'em talk and they didn't none talk Spanish. Robber Hills owlhoot outfit, I figger, not from down *manana* way, though I reckon they ran the herd down there."

"Mebbe," Hatfield commented noncommittally.

CHAPTER XVIII

Vanishing Waters

GHOST VALLEY country discussed this latest outrage with vehemence and many wild conjectures.

"Somebody's jest gettin' even with the oilers for the things *they* did,"

was a remark overheard more than once on the streets of Saba, and which caused Hatfield's black brows to draw together.

A week passed, with the Cross G riders stripping the ranch to get together a second trail herd. Nights found them utterly worn out, and sleeping soundly. Not so soundly, however, as not to be aroused in the dark hours just before the dawn of a night some ten days after the wide-looping on the Saba Trail.

Jim Hatfield sat up in his bed, listening to the reverberating echoes of the far-off, thundering report that had awakened him.

As he listened, a second detonation shook the air.

"If that's thunder, it shore is cut off short," he muttered.

"You hear that?" called Ralpho's voice from across the hall.

"Ain't deaf," Hatfield replied. "What yuh s'pose it is?"

"*El Dios* knows," Ralpho replied piously. "Anything may happen in this land accurst. Ha! Another one!'

Still another deep-toned rumble followed, and a fifth, and a sixth.

"Them last ones sounded almost like thunder," Hatfield commented. "Sorta strung out and continuous."

He listened for a long time, but no further explosions shattered the silence of the night. Finally he went back to sleep. The mystery could wait until morning.

More mystery appeared in the morning. Hatfield, with Don Nicalosa, Clem and Ralpho, were eating breakfast in the ranchhouse kitchen when a *vaquero* who had spent the night in town came charging into the yard on a lathered horse.

"The river!" he yelled, swinging down from his mount. "The river eet ees gone!"

Clem gave a long whistle.

"My gosh!" he exlaimed. "What kinda stuff are they sellin' in Saba now? I've seen snakes and things, but I never knowed a feller to get so boiled up he'd lose a river! C'mon in here, you souse, and sober up!"

"I tell you eet ees gone!" persisted the *vaquero*. "The water eet ees not!"

"C'mon!" said Hatfield, rising to his feet, his face grim. He at least was taking the excited *vaquero* seriously. "C'mon! There's some more devilment a-foot, shore as yuh're a foot high!"

Saddling swiftly, they rode across the prairie to the bank of the little stream, and found that the *vaquero* had not been talking through a whiskey glass. Save for pools here and there, the river bed was dry. The swift stream no longer hurried toward the desert and the eastern range!

DON NICALOSA and his men stared at one another in bewilderment, uttering amazed exclamations, none of them coherent comments that might hold an explanation. Hatfield's face was grimmer than before, his eyes cold and gray.

"We're ridin' north—fast," was all he said. "I figger I know the meanin' of this, and it's trouble a-plenty."

They thundered up the valley, but before they reached its head they learned that others were before them. The Bar S outfit was there, and men from other spreads, staring at the mass of jumbled, shattered stone that for an extent of nearly half a mile filled the narrow gorge almost to the top of the cliffs. The crests of the cliffs showed colossal shatterings, the brighter gleam of fresh cleavage contrasting with the weather-beaten surfaces.

"Them explosions we heard last night were made by dynamite," Hatfield quietly explained to Don Nicalosa, on whose face was a weary, beaten look. "Whoever done this mined them overhangs up at the tops of the cliffs and set 'em off. Explosions started slides, too, and choked the gorge."

"And dammed the river!" Clem, the Texan, exclaimed excitedly. He was far enough recovered now to ride, and take his usual interest in everything. "They won't no water run down this way till she fills up enough to run over the top."

"I don't think this is all," Hatfield told him grimly. "We'll get on top of the cliffs and ride to the head of

the canyon and see what's what."

They got on top of those high cliffs, after riding back down the valley for some distance, and encountering difficulty and danger. The other outfits streamed along behind them.

Once on top of the cliffs, progress was swifter. Finally Hatfield reined in where the end wall of the canyon should have been. In its place was a shattered mass of stone that littered the steep slope to the floor of the lower canyon to the north. And over this rubble foamed and thundered the water from the springs, the water that had previously swelled the little river that was life to Ghost Valley.

At first the ranchers did not realize the extent of the catastrophe. It was stunning in its immensity. Then old Wirt Slaven let out a bitter oath.

"This settles it!" he rumbled, his voice choking with passion. "I'm pullin' out jest as soon as I can locate a place to pull to. I thought I'd found something good when I come down here, but now it's been nothin' but bad luck for the past year, and this tops it off."

"What you mean, Boss?" asked one of his bewildered men.

"Mean!" roared old Wirt. "You blasted-crazy idjut, ain't yuh got eyes? Can't yuh see there'll be no more water comin' down Ghost Valley, and without water, Ghost Valley is jest another part of that blamed desert out there?" He listened a moment while another of his men said something, then exploded again.

"What? Clean out the gorge and turn the river back again? That'd take weeks and months and thousands and thousands of dollars I ain't got! Does anybody wanta buy a spread for a chaw of eatin' tobacco? I got title to a nice developin' chunk of desert. Any takers?" He shot belligerent glances in all directions.

"He is right," Don Nicalosa told Hatfield. "Without water, Ghost Valley is doomed. Who could have perpetrated this outrage, and why?"

"That remains to be seen," Hatfield replied quietly. "And listen, Don Nicalosa, don't you go sellin' out to anybody that might make yuh an offer for yore land. Promise me! I'm goin' to have a plain talk with Old Wirt about that, too."

THE *hidalgo* hesitated, felt the force behind those level green eyes, and nodded.

"Very well," he said, "I will promise, though why I do not know. It seems foolish. Would you mind telling me your reason for extracting this promise, if any?"

"Why do you s'pose somebody done this?" Hatfield countered.

Don Nicalosa shook his head.

"What will it do?" Hatfield persisted.

"It will run the cattlemen out of the valley," Don Nicalosa replied.

"Exactly," Hatfield said grimly. "And that's also exactly what somebody wants to do, the end toward which somebody has been workin' for the past several months. This is their final stroke, after other means appear to have failed. They're growin' desperate, and I've got a notion they will tip their hand right soon. You hang onto yore spread, like I'm a-tellin' yuh. If it's worth somebody else trying to get it, it's worth hanging onto, jest why I don't know—yet. But I hope to plumb soon."

Don Nicalosa stared at the tall, green-eyed man who had so abruptly reversed the status of hired hand and employer, and bowed to a stronger will. Jim Hatfield appeared to have usurped all the authority in sight.

"I wish now I'd sold out to that syndicate over to the capital when they made me a right good offer a coupla months back," old Wirt was raging. "Don't figger they'll offer a plugged nickel now, but if they do I'll take it."

Hatfield darted a significant glance at Don Nicalosa, and made a quick decision not to speak to old Wirt Slaven about the matter of selling or not selling—not just yet.

They rode to town after that, and the town boiled, for the news had already been spread around. Jim Hatfield, passing from bar to bar and group to group, listening, observing, began hearing a comment that nar-

rowed his green eyes and tightened his lean jaw.

"They're sayin' Gomez done this to even up for the herd he had wide-looped," one man remarked to another. "They say that because he's been cleaned out he don't mean for anybody else to have the valley spreads if he can't have 'em."

"Who says that?" the man who was listening wanted to know.

"Don't know jest who started the talk," replied the informant, "but I been gettin' it straight from lotsa fellers. Begins to look like they's somethin' to it when so many knows about it. Yuh know what they always say about smoke and fire."

"If that's so, them oilers had oughta be turned into cottonwood apples!" growled the other man.

Hatfield went to the post office. Bigboy Malarkey had a letter for him, a letter from Captain Bill McDowell. Hatfield read the contents, his eyes glowing. He raised his gaze to the open window and stared long and earnestly at the golden daplings of the sunlight in the dust.

"It's tyin' up proper," he murmured. "Not quite tight, yet. Still one string knockin' around loose, but I got a hazy sorta notion as to where the knot in that is. Believe I'm about ready to act."

HE glanced back, to find Bigboy Malarkey eying him strangely.

"Feller," the stable keeper said slowly, "I'm beginnin' to recollect things about yuh, and I'm about ready to run a brand on yuh. Ain't you McDowell's lieutenant, the feller that busted up the Night Riders of Silver Valley, and the Alamita Basin gang?"

Hatfield's nod admitted the correctness of the surmise.

"Uh-huh, I gotcha now," muttered Bigboy. "The Lone Wolf! That's what they're always a-callin' yuh—the Lone Wolf!"

Hatfield grinned, but made no comment. He left, and went in search of Wirt Slaven.

"Headed for his ranch a coupla hours ago," a bartender told him "Was in the First Chance and had a long talk with John Sanderson and his foreman, Hartsook, and then rode off for his spread."

Hatfield rode too. The letter from Captain McDowell had decided him that it was time to have a talk with Wirt Slaven, easily the most influential man in the whole Ghost Valley section.

"And," he added to himself grimly, "it's jest about time for me to twirl my noose, too!"

Instinctively his slim right hand crept toward the black butt of the heavy Colt snugged against his muscular thigh. He loosened the big gun in its carefully worked and oiled holster, half drew it, let it slip back again, and his green eyes were like swift water under snow-swept ice.

"First time in a long time I've been hopin' an hombre won't put up his hands when I tell him to," he muttered, visioning again that terrible ordeal in the deserted prospector's cabin.

CHAPTER XIX

Message of the Cross

JIM HATFIELD reached the Bar S ranchhouse when the sun was well down the western sky. A wrangler took his horse.

"Put him in the stable and take his rig off," Rena Slaven told the wrangler when she met Hatfield at the door and he asked for her father.

"Dad rode over to talk with Grandpap Wagner and the Frazer brothers," she told the Ranger. "He won't be back until late. You are just in time to save me from having to eat my supper alone. I let the cook off for the day and he rode to town to celebrate. Come on in and see how well I can cook."

They ate together—an enjoyable meal, and then repaired to the big main room to sit under the high, embrasured windows and talk. The matter of the diverted water was naturally uppermost in the mind of each, and it had been the main subject

of discussion ever since the Ranger's arrival.

"I hate to see Dad lose his spread, and I hate to leave here," the girl said, adding with a pathetic little sigh: "If it would only cause Ramon to change his attitude, though, I'd think it was worth it. He's so foolishly proud. He won't ask Dad for me until he figures he has as much to offer me as Dad has. I'd live in a one-room cabin with him as my husband, and do my own cooking and washing, and be happy. But Ramon is as proud as old Sebastian himself must have been. Oh, why couldn't the princess have kept those jewels of hers! If she had, Ramon might have inherited a fortune. As it is, all that's left are the stone walls of this old mission house, and an old iron cross."

She glanced across the darkening room as she spoke.

"Look, Mr. Hatfield! The light is beginning to reflect from it now!"

Hatfield stared at the peculiar reflected glow, noting again how it shifted from point to point on the ancient crucifix.

"Seems almost like it was trying to spell out something," he mused.

Suddenly he started to his feet and strode swiftly across the room to stand staring intently at the cross imbedded in the stone. With keen eyes he examined every inch of the stone work, stepped back and stared at the cross again.

"What on earth are you doing?" asked the girl, over his shoulder.

Hatfield glanced at her absently.

"Let's see," he said, though quite obviously he was only thinking aloud. "How did the light reflect—top of the cross, from the left arm, the bottom, the right." He glanced at Rena. "That's right, isn't it? Top, left, bottom, right?"

"Yes." The girl nodded. "Why? What on earth are you getting at?"

Without answering, Hatfield drew his heavy Colt and gripped it by the barrel. Reaching up he struck with the butt against the top of the iron cross, then on the tip of the left arm, then at the bottom of the vertical, then on the right tip of the horizontal.

"Didn't that slab of stone seem to shake?" he asked the girl, his voice tense with excitement.

"I—I believe it did!" she breathed. "Why—what—"

HATFIELD struck again, harder this time. There was a creaking, grinding sound.

"It's moving!" gasped the girl. "It's moving!"

It was. The huge slab turned farther. A narrow black opening was revealed. It widened. The stone was at right angles to its former position now, and still moving. A dry, musty smell exuded from the black opening. The stone continued to turn. It made a complete revolution, and settled back to its original position.

"What in the world?" cried the amazed girl. "Oh, Mr. Hatfield! What—"

"Wait," Hatfield told her.

He glanced about, then strode to one of the big bracket lamps nearby. He removed the lamp from its stand and lighted it. It was full of oil, was freshly trimmed, with a shining chimney, and burned with a clear flame.

"Hold it," he told the girl.

Again he struck the alternate blows upon the iron cross, and again the stone panel swung open, more readily this time, now that the long unused machinery had been put into motion.

"Simple system of counterpoises," the Ranger muttered. "Heavy brass chains, the chances are. They would last forever in this dry climate."

He took the lamp from the girl and peered through the widening opening. It led into a narrow, stone-walled gallery that had been set within the the thickness of the wall. Near the turning door he saw a heavy stone wheel set on a stone spindle. The wheel revolved slowly.

"That's how yuh open it from the inside," he muttered. He turned around and looked at Rena. "You stay out here," he told her, "so's yuh can open it if that wheel don't do the trick like I think it will. You saw how it opens from this side."

Before she could protest, he had stepped through the opening. A mo-

ment later the door ground shut. Utter silence settled down upon him, and he know that to the girl outside it must seem as if he had been swallowed up forever.

Placing the lamp on the floor, Hatfield grasped the stone wheel and threw his weight against it. It turned readily and the door began to open. When the opening was at its greatest, he held the wheel fast. The stone slab remained stationary. The awe-stricken, white face of Rena Slaven was staring at him through the opening.

"I'm going to see where the passage leads to," he told Rena matter-of-factly. "This is getting interestin'."

Instantly she stepped through the opening.

"I'm going with you," she announced with finality.

For a moment Hatfield hesitated, then he shrugged his broad shoulders. Long ago the Lone Wolf had learned the futility of arguing with a woman when she spoke in that tone of voice—whoever she might be. And after all, Rena Slaven had a right to explore here in her own home.

"All right," he capitulated. "But it's apt to be scary—sorta like amblin' around in a grave before yore time."

"You're tryin' to frighten me," Rena exclaimed derisively. "Lead on! I'm just as curious as you are. Goodness, but it's hot and dry in here!"

THEY started shuffling along the narrow passage. Before them loomed a blank stone wall. But here the passage turned at right angles. It turned again, and again, apparently doubling back on itself.

"I believe it follows the pattern of a cross," Hatfield finally announced. "Look out, here's an opening in the floor."

He peered closer, saw a flight of stone steps leading downward into the dark. Down these they cautiously groped their way, until they knew they must be far below the foundation stones of the great walls.

Another passage stretched before them. They followed it until a blank wall loomed in the flickering lamplight. And in this wall was imbedded an iron cross similar to the one in the room above.

"Another combination knob, I reckon," Hatfield muttered. "Well, here goes."

Again he struck with the butt of his gun, and once more a slab of stone turned on a pivot.

"This one's movin' faster," the Ranger exclaimed. "Quick, be ready to slip in when she's at the widest."

An instant later they slipped through the black opening, the swinging stone brushing against their shoulders and rasping shut the instant they were through.

"The old fellers who built this place shore didn't want any draughts blowing into their rooms," Hatfield grunted, holding the lamp high and peering about.

They were in a square chamber, stone-walled, and with stone floor and ceiling. In the middle of it was a stone table, upon which rested several objects, including a small stone coffer with a closed lid, and a quaintly shaped leaden candlestick.

Before the table was a stone chair, and in that chair, huddled against the table edge, was what appeared to be a bundle of grayish cloth.

Hatfield stepped forward, still holding the lamp high. He touched a fold of the cloth and it crumbled to dust beneath his fingers, to expose —with the skin wrinkled and blackened and drawn tight against the fleshless bones—a clawlike human hand!

With a sharp exclamation, Hatfield stepped back. The girl shrank close against him, wide-eyed and fearful.

"For heaven's sake!" she gasped. "What it it? What have we found?"

"Don't yuh know?" Hatfield said quietly. "It's the old abbott that Ramon Estrada told us about. It's all that's left of Fray Marcos."

"Impossible!" cried Rena. "Why, he died hundreds of years ago!"

"He's mummified," Hatfield pointed out. "In this dry, hot air, with nothing to disturb him, he would last forever. Here is where he came to die

after being wounded in the battle."

Suddenly he stepped forward again, picked up the stone coffer and, setting the lamp on the table, pried up the lid. It opened readily on its stone hinges and Hatfield and the girl drew back from the dazzling, many-colored sheen that glittered from the contents.

"The jewels!" exclaimed Rena. "The princess' jewels!"

HATFIELD nodded, stirring them with his slim fingers. There was a double-handful or more—rubies the color of blood, diamonds that reflected back the lamplight in prismatic fire, emeralds pure as the tender greens of spring, smoldering opals, and others.

"Begins to look like Ramon Estrada can get into another kind of business without much trouble," Hatfield remarked soberly.

"Yes!" the girl breathed. "Oh, yes!"

Her eyes were brighter than the diamonds, bluer than the flawless sapphires. Hatfield's lips quirked in a smile of understanding as he spread a handkerchief on the table and emptied the contents of the coffer upon it. Tying the corners, he handed the bundle to the girl, who carefully placed it inside her blouse.

"Will make a nice weddin' present from the bride," Hatfield remarked, chuckling.

He turned back to the table, where sat the sad remains of the old monk. A needle-pointed dagger, rusted and tarnished, lay beside the clawlike hand, and nearby was an ancient volume, clamped with iron.

Reverently, Hatfield raised the covering boards. Beneath were yellowed sheets of vellum upon which words had been written in quaint old Spanish. He turned the pages, careful not to shatter the aged and brittle parchment. There were not many, and the crooked letters scrawled upon the last were of a strange, rusty color.

Hatfield peered closer. "Blood!" he muttered. "His last message, written in his blood. And there"—he gestured toward the discolored dagger—"is his pen."

CHAPTER XX

Cramped In a Coffin

SLOWLY and laboriously Hatfield translated the last words of the man who centuries before had sat writing with a trembling hand while the flickering light of the candle made strange patterns on the silent walls. The girl leaned closer, breathing sharply, as Hatfield read what Fray Marcos had written:

I am dying. I have crept here to the secret chamber of meditation to die. The brothers are dead, and I alone am left to die, and my time is short. With my last strength I have foiled my murderers. The gems which they seek, for greed of which they slay and destroy, are here. The gold and the sacred images I hurled into the depths, but the gems I removed and saved, for they belong to the Princess Isabella who never more shall see them. Nor will any chance discoverer of this place bear them forth. May my curse rest upon the slayers and the slayers of the brethren. The candle burns low and the shadows creep nearer. Soon I will be alone, with the black dark close about me. Soon I will go forth into the outer dark, whence the brethren have gone before me, leaving me alone. The candle dies, the dark draws near. Into thy hands, O Master!

The girl was crying softly.

"No wonder I have known that terrible feeling of oppression and loneliness and despair," she sobbed. "All through the centuries and the years he has been sitting here in the black dark—alone. It was his lonely, forgotten spirit calling to us, asking for the sunshine and light. We will take him away from here, Jim, as he wishes. Take him out where he can rest with the sunbeams warming the earth above him and the green leaves rustling and the breezes blowing—where the soft and gentle fingers of the rain can reach down to caress him in his bedroom, *in the ground!*"

Her voice died to a soft and thrilling whisper. Jim Hatfield bowed his tall head and for a moment they stood

in silent communion with the spirit of the ancient dead. . . .

Again Hatfield picked up the old volume that had been Fray Marcos' private diary. It appeared to begin with the arrival of the brethren at the valley and dealt largely with the building of the mission.

The concentration furrow between the Ranger's black brows deepened and his eyes glowed as he spelled out passages here and there. He was thankful for knowing Spanish, although most of this was so obsolete that it might almost as well have been a Sanskrit screed.

Finally he made out to translate:

The mysterious fires which spout from the earth have greatly awed and frightened the brethren and the ignorant soldiery. I have held my peace, for the effect may be salutory. Really they are not unusual. I have seen their like in the lands to the south of Spain. Here are beds of brimstone which have been ignited, doubtless, by a levin flash. When such happens, the brimstone s m o l d e r s for years, with strangely colored flames and an odor most unpleasant.

Hatfield laid down the book.

"The last knot's tied," he muttered. "The last knot!"

Half aloud, he repeated the return address on that envelope he had examined in the Saba post office: "Watson Chemical Company, Sodium Thiosulphate Products, New York, N. Y., and Bristol, Louisiana."

THE girl, who had been examining the stone coffer, started, and turned around to look at the Ranger.

"What did you say, Mr. Hatfield? I didn't understand you."

"I say we'd better be gettin' out of here," Hatfield replied, picking up the lamp.

With a last glance at the silent figure by the table, they turned to the stone slab that was the door. Hatfield moved confidently toward it, then halted as if petrified.

He had expected, as a matter of course, a stone wheel similar to that in the upper corridor, by which to wind up the hidden counterpoise and open the door. Only his tense excitement at the time could have explained how he could possibly have failed to make sure. But he had—and now only the slim, smooth rod of the stone spindle met his gaze. The wheel had been removed!

"It'll be around here somewhere," Hatfield remarked cheerfully when he heard Rena cry out as she, too, made that discovery. But the Ranger was voicing a confidence he did not feel.

They searched, searched every nook and cranny of the small chamber, even peering beneath the table and Fray Marcos' stone chair, and found nothing.

Hatfield moved to the door, handing Rena the lamp. He gripped the stone spindle with his powerful hands and twisted until his face was drawn with strain. Then he took off his belt, made a loop and tried to get a purchase on the smooth stone. But every effort was futile.

Wiping the sweat from his streaming face he turned to the girl. They stared at one another, each dreading to voice the thought that was in the mind of each. They were buried alive!

Hatfield tried lunging at the door, to no avail. It was utterly solid, as immovable as the ponderous walls.

"Perhaps if we shout somebody will hear us?" Rena suggested.

"Not much chance," Hatfield replied. "We're far down beneath the foundations, with the passages closed by two thick doors of stone. I don't believe a thunderclap would be heard down here. I'll try, though."

He yelled until he was hoarse and his throat was parched. Then he drew his gun and fired a shot. The report was deafening in the enclosed space, but got no more results than the yells. They coughed from the acrid fumes of the burned powder.

"Can't do that any more," Hatfield gasped. "Suffocate us. Mighty little air in here anyhow.

They went back to the table and stared, with prophetic shudders, at the mummified form of the old priest. How long would it be before they were even as he?

The girl sat down on the stone floor, with her back to the wall.

"I'm utterly exhausted," she said, with a brave attempt to speak casually. "Sit down, Mr. Hatfield. We might as well rest. No sense in dying tired."

Hatfield grinned down at her, a warm light in his green eyes.

"Yuh're real, little lady!" he applauded. "If this is trail's end, I know I shore picked good company to start on the big trip with!"

HE glanced at the lamp. Already the oil was half gone.

"No sense in burnin' it all up," he muttered. "If something should turn up, we'll need it. Besides, it burns air we will be needin' mighty bad before long."

With that he blew out the light, groped to where the girl was propped against the wall, and sat down beside her.

The silence was deathly, terrible, oppressive. It curdled the brain, numbed the senses.

Despite the horror of their predicament, though, before long Hatfield felt himself growing drowsy. The girl's slender body was pressing heavily against him. Already she was asleep. He struggled against the terrible drowsiness for a few minutes, fearing that to sleep would mean to die, then his chin dropped forward upon his breast. . . .

When Hatfield awoke, he knew from the stiffness of his muscles that he had slept for many hours. He could feel the girl stirring against the arms he had thrown around her protectingly. She shuddered, with returning consciousness and realization of their plight.

"I'm terribly thirsty," she said forlornly.

Hatfield's own throat was like hot leather, his tongue already swelling in his mouth, and he knew that this was nothing to what they would later be forced to bear. But when he spoke, he simulated cheerfulness.

"We been here a long time, now. Yore dad will be lookin' for yuh."

"He'll never find us," the girl replied quietly. "Nobody knows we entered here. Nobody would ever guess. What became of us will always be a mystery. No, Mr. Hatfield —I'm going to call you Jim, now— we might as well face it. We'll never again see the sun or breathe the outer air."

Hatfield was silent, mechanically repeating her words in his mind. Then suddenly he uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Air!" he repeated, "Air! Do you realize, Rena, that the air in this little room has kept fresh all these hours? If this room was airtight as it seems to be, we woulda suffocated long ago!"

"Perhaps some comes in around the door," she suggested.

"That door is airtight if one ever was," Hatfield differed vigorously. "And remember how much drier and closer the upper passages were? No, air is getting in here some way. We've gotta find out how. Where something comes in, something can go out!"

With the rebirth of hope, faint though it was, life surged in their lethargic veins. They scrambled to their feet and Hatfield lit the lamp. Carefully they went over the chamber, walls and floor. They moved the table, which taxed the Ranger's strength to budge, and found—nothing. Hatfield knelt and peered under the stone bench, upon which Fray Marcos' mummified form still huddled. He held the lamp high and examined the low ceiling, with barren results.

The girl stared at the form of the old monk.

"He seems to be telling us something," she breathed in an awed whisper. "Jim, I don't believe he wants us to die here. Perhaps there is something in his book!"

HATFIELD was thinking furiously. He recalled the passages he had read. And then abruptly one stood out in his mind!

The gold and the sacred images I hurled into the depths, but the gems I removed and saved . . .

"He musta removed 'em while he was in here, because he wouldn't have had time for that outside," the Ranger muttered.

He stepped forward, carefully gathered the wasted, skin-covered skeleton in his arms and lifted it from the bench. The robe crumbled and fell apart, but the stone whereupon the wide skirt had rested was uncovered.

"Look!" gasped Rena. "Oh, Jim, look!"

Imbedded in the stone, hitherto hidden by the voluminous folds of the crumbling tatters of the gown, was a heavy stone ring about four inches in diameter!

CHAPTER XXI

Inside the Earth

PAUSING instantly, Hatfield reverently laid the shriveled body on the table. Then he knelt beside the ring.

"This slab of stone ain't cemented to the others," he told the girl eagerly. "There are cracks around it, and there's air comin' through the cracks."

Drawing his knife he picked at the stone ring with the point, got the blade underneath it and levered. The ring arose. Being of stone, it had not set tight in its groove, as an iron one would have done. Pocketing the knife, he got his powerful fingers within the ring and heaved with all his strength. The slab resisted, creaking and grinding.

Again the Ranger put forth every atom of his mighty power. Up came the stone, so suddenly that Hatfield sprawled on the floor. A black opening yawned before him. He held the lamp close, disclosing a flight of stone steps stretching down into the dark.

"Don't look so good," Hatfield muttered, "but it goes somewhere, anyhow. Don't that cool damp air feel fine?"

Rena agreed fervently that it did, and then, with a last glance at the silent form of the old monk, they left the grim chamber of age-old death.

The steps ended in a low passage, walled with rough blocks of stone. The ceiling was a dense mass of black rock and the passage was so low that they were forced to creep on all fours.

"Runs under one of the walls," Hatfield decided, as they started to crawl.

Fifty feet farther along, and the passage widened. The sides were no longer of stone, and the roof had a burned and blistered look.

"In a natural blowhole of gas or steam," said Hatfield. "We . . . look out!"

He halted abruptly, holding the lamp before him, peering over the edge of a dark chasm of unguessable depth. Its lip was rimmed with a yellowish ash that gave off a disagreeable odor.

"Here's where he throwed the sacred images, the chances are," Hatfield remarked. "And here"—he added this grimly, remembering their own plight—"is where he throwed that wheel after he removed it from the spindle, or I'm a lot mistook. That's what he meant when he wrote that nobody who even happened to stumble onto the chamber would carry the gems out. He figured on trapping any of the hellions who might hit onto the combination and open the passages. Covered the flagstone and the stone ring with his gown, feeling pretty shore that none of 'em would touch his body if they did happen to get in . . . Well, looks like we can scuffle around the edge of the pit there on the right. Sorta narrow, but we can make it."

They did, holding their breath at times, as the edge crumbled, and they hugged the wall in desperation. Beyond the pit was a winding burrow in which they could stand erect.

On they trudged and on and on, dizzy with fatigue, parched by thirst. From time to time Hatfield glanced apprehensively at the lamp. The oil was almost gone. Soon they would be left to stumble in the black dark.

"Isn't that a sound?" the girl asked suddenly.

JIM HATFIELD listened, and his ears had never heard sweeter music.

"It is!" he exclaimed. "It's water!"

They hurried onward, gasping, their eyes straining.

"Here it is!" Hatfield choked out, as a gleam of light reflected at his feet.

They threw themselves down at the verge of the hurrying stream and drank and drank of the icy water. Finally the Ranger rocked back on his heels with a deep sigh and fumbled in his pockets for "the makin's."

They rested beside the water until Hatfield had finished his cigarette. Then they started again.

"Might as well follow the stream," the Ranger decided. "Chances are the water reaches the outside somewheres. The match flame bent upstream when I struck it. Air flows in, not out, so we'll be travelin' against the draft and toward where it comes in by going downstream."

They wandered on, sometimes on the bank of the strange, underground river, sometimes sloshing through shallow water when walls of the tunnel dropped sheer to the water's edge. Aching muscles were urged to effort only by hope. And then the lamp began to jump and flicker.

"Oil's gone," Hatfield said, adding cheerfully: "Don't make much difference anyhow. We can't see where we're going, with a light or without one."

A last, almost human gasp, and the light went out. The dark crowded down upon them with the intensity of a solid. It seemed to press against them, to tighten their chests and contract their throats. The girl shivered and her small hand crept into Hatfield's for the comfort of human contact.

On and on, losing all sense of direction and time, if they had possessed either, for a long time. They seemed to swing unsustained in a bleak eternity wherein nothing was real. Even the splash and murmur of the stream seemed tenuous and far away. Their movements were automatic and not a part of themselves. And just beyond the whisper of the waters, the silence stood as a mighty wall.

The girl began to stumble. Her strength was going, at last, as bravely as she had borne up. Both were ravenous with hunger, for they had not eaten for many hours, and the lack of food was sapping both their physical and mental powers.

"I—I'm afraid I can't go on, Jim," Rena murmured. "Tired—so tired. You go on alone. Save yourself."

Hatfield's answer was to pick her up and cradle her in his arms. She protested, and feebly tried to struggle down again. Then with a long sigh she relaxed and her body grew limp.

Grimly the Ranger fought on through the dark, stumbling, reeling, calling on the last reserves of strength left in his powerful body. Once he lurched to his knees and arose painfully and slowly. He was walking entirely in the water, now, for he feared if he did not he might wander hazily off along some side passage or cleft and become utterly lost in the bowels of the earth.

HE knew they had come many miles through fearsome underground passages. A terrible feeling began to grow in his mind that they were traveling in a circle and would eventually reach their starting point again.

"Foolishness!" he muttered. "Water don't run around in circles."

But still the clammy fear persisted in his fatigue-poisoned mind.

Again he stumbled drunkenly and almost fell. The slight form of the girl, so small a burden when he had first taken her in his arms, was now a terrible weight that dragged him down. The blackness seemed to roar at him, and at each step he felt that he was pressing against a stubbornly yielding wall.

The stream turned and twisted, and it seemed to Hatfield that the power of the current was increasing, the water flowing more swiftly. He reeled around a slow bend and blinked his eyes in amazement. Ahead there

seemed to be a tiny, reddish glow.

"I'm seein' things," he muttered. "Must be!"

But the glow brightened and increased, until it was a pulsing sheet of flame barring the passage. He stumbled toward it, and as he approached it discovered a circular edge. And then he knew! It was the setting sun, low in the western sky, pouring its red rays into the passage.

He broke into a shambling run, sloshing through the water, which now ran at such a furious speed that it almost swept him off his feet. He could hear what sounded like the roar of a falls or rapids. A moment later he reached the opening where the stream burst through the rock and went roaring down a steep incline over rubble and broken stone.

The lip of the opening was littered with rough blocks and fragments, over and between which the water seethed and boiled. With great difficulty, burdened as he was with the nearly unconscious girl, Hatfield scrambled over them and reached the outer air.

He clambered up a steep slope and came to rest, panting and exhausted, on a little bench where grass grew. He placed the girl on the grass, straightened up and dazedly gazed about.

Now he knew where he was. Here was where the water that formed the Ghost Valley river made its way from under the canyon wall at the head of the valley. He stared at the low opening, through which he had been forced to stoop to pass, and realized how the opening was such he had been able to pass at all.

"Them hellions that blew the cliffs down," he muttered, "didn't know what they were doin' for me and this girl, or mebbe they wouldn't even have done it. If it hadn't been for their doin' that, we would never have got out. The way the cliff used to be before it was dynamited, the water boiled up from under it. When they blew the cliffs, they made the openin' bigger—which was shore a life-saver for us!" His lean jaw set hard. "Sorta uncoiled the rope to hang theirselves with," he muttered.

THE girl was stirring. She sat up dizzily, gradually came to a realization of what had taken place, and gave a glad cry.

"We're out! Oh, Jim, we're out!"

"Uh-huh," the Ranger told her, grinning. "We're shore enough out all right. Now you jest lie still and rest until I get a fire goin.' We're both soakin' wet, and it'll be cooler in a little while, when the sun goes down. I reckon we'd better stay here till mornin.' I don't hardly feel up to the tramp down the valley tonight—and I feel you don't either."

"I couldn't do it," Rena declared with conviction, "and you must be utterly worn out, after carrying me like you did. Oh, Jim! That's the second time you've done that for me!"

"I'm feelin' a heap better," Hatfield told her with truth. "Now if I can just knock off a blue grouse or two or a rabbit, we'll eat. I'm so hungry my stomach's askin' my throat if it's been cut."

The growth on the slope provided plenty of dry wood and Hatfield had matches in a flat, tightly corked bottle that defied the damp. Experience had long since taught him the necessity of that precaution. Soon the fire was crackling and snapping, and the girl was holding her chilled hands to it.

Jim Hatfield climbed the slope in search of game. Grouse were plentiful, he knew, and he soon heard them whistling down the sun. A little later he managed to shoot the heads off two. In short order he had them plucked and cleaned, and they were toasting over the flames.

They ate those grouse—ate them without salt, and pronounced them utterly delicious.

"After yuh've been wanderin' around inside the ground for twenty-four hours, anything tastes good," the Ranger declared with a long sigh, surveying the cleanly picked bones of the unfortunate birds.

He built up the fire, laid a supply

of wood handy with which to replenish it during the night, and they went to sleep under the stars . . . They slept until the sun was up and then, refreshed and strong again, started down the valley.

"It was worth it," the girl said, feeling the tight little bundle that contained the gems, "but I don't want to go through another such experience."

"Me, neither," Hatfield agreed fervently, "but I shore consider it was worth while, too."

He instinctively loosened the big gun in his right holster as he spoke, and his eyes were bleak.

CHAPTER XXII

Star and Circle

MORNING was gone, and it was well past noon when Jim Hatfield and Rena Slaven reached the ranchhouse—only to find it apparently deserted. But as they entered the building, the old cook appeared. He let out an astounded yell.

"Miss Rena! Good gosh, where'd you come from?"

"I'll tell you all about it later, Uncle Ike," the girl replied. "Where's Dad and the boys?"

"Holy rattlesnakes!" exclaimed Uncle Ike. "Good gosh-all-hemlock! If this ain't a mess! Yore dad and the boys and a lotta other fellers rode to the Cross G ranch to clean out the oilers. John Sanderson and his men swore Gomez musta stole you and murdered Hatfield. There'll be killin's shore as Gawd made little apples, and all a mistake! The sheriff's outa town, too. Warn't expected back 'fore noon."

"Good heavens!" gasped the girl. "Jim, what can we do?"

Hatfield turned to the cook, his eyes cold as frosted steel.

"My hoss?" he demanded. "He's still in the barn?"

"Uh-huh, guess so. Didn't see nobody take him out. He—"

But Hatfield was already racing to the stable, the girl flying after him. Goldy welcomed him with a glad whinny. Hatfield got the rig on him at lightning speed.

"Yuh're riding with me," he told Rena. "Never mind yore hoss. No hoss in Texas can keep up with Goldy when he's siftin' sand. He won't notice yore extra weight. All right, up we go!"

A moment later they were thundering out of the ranchhouse yard, with the old cook in the doorway staring after them in round-eyed amazement.

Straight across the valley Hatfield sent the great sorrel, begging him for speed and more speed. Goldy answered by stretching his glossy neck and literally pouring his great body over the ground. Mane flying, eyes rolling, red nostrils flaring, he kicked the miles behind his flickering irons. They reached the dry bed of the river, clattered over the stones and crashed up the far bank.

"Listen!" the girl exclaimed as Goldy straightened out again.

Hatfield heard it too—a snapping crackle, like sticks burning in a brisk fire.

"Shootin' it out already!" he muttered, and urged Goldy on with voice and hand.

On they flew, up a long slope, topped the rise, and from the crest looked down upon the Cross G ranchhouse. Puffs of whitish smoke were mushrooming up at uneven intervals.

"Don Nick saw them comin', or heard about it, and him and the boys are holed up behind that stone wall he built to fence his ranchouse yard!" Hatfield exclaimed, taking in the situation at a glance. "And yore dad and his men are lyin' this side that little rise, behind rocks and brush. If we can jest get there before they get their mad up enough to chance a rush! I've a notion nobody's been plugged yet."

DOWN the slope they stormed, and across a level. Shouts suddenly sounded, and the men behind the rise turned to stare at the charging horse with his double load. Some

impulsive individual snapped a shot at them and the bullet screeched angrily past. Hatfield swore a bitter oath and shielded the girl with his own body.

Another moment and he was pulling Goldy to a sliding halt. Deftly he swung Rena to the ground and heard old Wirt Slaven's joyous roar as he recognized his daughter.

Forward thundered the great sorrel. Hatfield hit the ground while the horse was still in full stride. Fearlessly he walked between the embattled forces. He faced the Bar S punchers and their allies and his voice rang out, edged with steel, pregnant with authority:

"We've had enough of this blame foolishness! Holster them guns, disperse, and go about yore business in an orderly and law-abidin' manner!"

For a moment there was a stunned silence. Then an angry man shouted:

"Who in all get-out are you to be givin' orders around here?"

Hatfield glanced at the speaker. The man was Walt Hartsook, John Sanderson's ranch foreman. He stood a little to one side of the Bar S forces. With him were Sanderson and nearly a dozen of his hard-faced riders.

For a moment Hatfield gazed at the speaker, and his eyes were like pale flames in his bronzed face. Then suddenly he raised his left hand that all might see the object glittering in his palm—the silver star set on a silver circle! The honored and respected badge of the Texas Rangers!

"In the name of the state of Texas!"

His voice rang out like a bugle call, and the astounded hearers did not even notice the three frothing horses racing toward them from the direction of town.

"A Ranger!" exclaimed an awed cowboy. "That feller's a Texas Ranger!"

"Yeah!" yelled the rider of one of the three horses, pulling his mount to a foaming, panting halt and swinging to the ground, his one eye blazing. "Yeah, a Ranger! And—the *Lone Wolf!* Anybody ever heard of him?"

They had, and they had heard plenty!

"Gawd-a-mighty!" Walt Hartsook breathed hoarsely. "Now I got him placed at last. Good grief, Sanchos!"

Hatfield's icy eyes had never left Hartsook's face. From the corner of one eye he had noted the arrival of Bigboy Malarkey, Sheriff Cronin, and Ramon Estrada. Now he took a step toward Hartsook and Sanderson, deftly pinning the star to his shirt front as he moved, leaving both hands free. Again his voice rang out.

"John Sanderson, alias Juan Sanchos, you and yore men are under arrest for robbery and murder! And that goes for you, too, Walt Hartsook—Wade Hendricks—John Wesley Hardin!"

MEN gasped as they heard pronounced the name of one of Texas' most famous outlaws, "the fastest man with a gun in the whole Southwest!"

For a writhing instant, Hartsook stared at the Ranger, his face livid to the lips. Then he moved, moved like a lashing sidewinder. His right hand flicked under his left armpit and out in a wisping blur.

But even as the short-barreled gun he had drawn yawned toward the Ranger's broad breast, Hartsook stiffened, reeled and fell, two heavy slugs laced through his heart. Hatfield fired again and John Sanderson screamed with pain and gripped his blood-spouting shoulder, his gun falling from nerveless fingers.

"Look out!" howled Bigboy Malarkey. "Shoot, Sheriff, shoot!"

The hard-faced Bowtie cowboy-gunmen were backing toward their horses, guns blazing. The sheriff's Colt boomed, and Bigboy and Ramon Estrada also fired as fast as they could pull trigger.

Hatfield's shirt sleeve was shot to ribbons by the Bowtie men. A red streak leaped across his bronzed cheek. Then his big guns wisped smoke and three of the Bowties went down. A fourth was wounded in the hand. The remainder threw down their guns and yelled for mercy.

As the sheriff, with plenty of aid

now from the Bar S and Cross G outfits, secured the prisoners, Hatfield walked over to where John Sanderson lay moaning and clutching his shattered shoulder. Wirt Slaven, Estrada, Bigboy Malarkey and Don Nicalosa gathered around.

"Might as well come clean, Sanchos," Hatfield said. "Come clean and fill up the gaps. Looks like yuh haven't got much time. But, mebbe, if yuh come clean, we can get yuh to a doctor in time to save yuh for a hangin'."

CHAPTER XXIII

Where High Adventure Calls

KNOWING that he had played his last card—and lost—the fear of death had entered the soul of Sanchos. He gasped and shuddered.

"I'll talk!" he panted. "Yuh know everything anyhow, curse yuh, but I'll talk." He still spoke in the Western drawl into which he had lapsed when he had left the East and returned to the land he knew so well.

"Go ahead," Hatfield prompted. "Tell Slaven and Don Nicalosa about them deposits under their land."

"Yes, I'm Sanchos—Juan Sanchos," the wounded man panted. "After I left the Southwest I managed the sulphur mines Hendricks—Hartsook—and his partner, Watson, owned in Louisiana, the mines they got by trickin' ignorant hill people into sellin' their land for a fraction of what it was worth. The mines there are played out—all the Louisiana mines are failin' and Texas is the comin' sulphur state.

"Yeah, Ghost Valley is underlaid with vast sulphur beds that are worth a fortune. Hendricks got hold of an old book written in Spanish and it told about fires comin' out of the ground in the valley where the old monks built their mission house. He felt shore the fires was caused by burnin' sulphur, and he was right.

"But Slaven and Don Nicalosa got here before we did. We had to run 'em out to get the valley. Tried to buy from Slaven through a firm in Austin, but he wouldn't sell. Yeah, the boys are all members of the old Devil River and Nueces gangs. We rounded 'em up after we come here, those who wasn't dead or in jail."

"Yuh was with Hendricks when, as John Hardin, he served time in the penitentiary, wasn't yuh, Sanchos?" prompted the Ranger.

"Yeah, I was there. So was Watson. I was born in Spain and I worked in the sulphur mines in Sicily and learned the business before I came here first to the Southwest. But I knew about the Louisiana fields and went to work there when I got out of the pen. Hardin and Watson joined me there — changed their names, of course, and we put over the Louisiana deal and made a lot of money. Woulda made a lot here if it hadn't been for you, blast yuh!"

He subsided, gasping with pain, and glaring hate at the Ranger.

"Tie up his shoulder and take him to town with the rest," Hatfield told the sheriff. "He ain't hurt half as bad as he thinks he is, and he'll make a good witness. We'll have the New York police pick up Watson, and that'll clean the outfit, I reckon. . . . And now, Slaven, and you, Don Nicalosa, I wanta have a little talk with both of yuh. As this here hellion says, yuh've got a fortune under yore feet—them sulphur beds."

"Danged if I can figger it, Hatfield," put in old Wirt. "What in blazes is sulphur good for 'cept to put into molasses in the springtime and make a mess that gags yuh to swaller? Or to kill bugs with it?"

HATFIELD chuckled. "Well, I can't tell you everything offhand," he replied, "but here are a few of the things. It's used in medicine to make 'Washed Sulphur,' a powder they treat parasitic skin diseases with, and a stronger and more active irritant called 'Sublimed Sulphur' that is used in ointments, and to make sodium thiosulphate and sodium sulphate, and to produce sulphur dioxide for room fumigation.

"Then yuh get sulphuric acid from it, without which yuh couldn't vulcanize rubber, and that's used in tannin' leather, too, and to harden and weather-proof fabrics. And without it yuh wouldn't have no good powder for yore shootin' irons, and yuh'd shore miss that in this here country. Photographers use it in their fixin' baths for pictures, so's yuh can see how blamed good-lookin' yuh was twenty years back compared to what yuh look like now.

"There are other things, but I figger that's about enough to give yuh some idea that without sulphur, folks would have a hard time gettin' along like they've got used to. What yuh've got here is down deep, like in Louisiana, and yuh'll mine it by circulatin' overheated steam through it and forcin' the liquid sulphur to the surface by compressed air."

"Gosh, feller," admired old Wirt, "when yuh get started yuh shore can rope and hogtie a lotta fancy words. Yeah, she sounds interestin', and valuable, the way yuh put it."

Hatfield nodded to the girl.

"Come here, Rena, and show Ramon what yuh got for him while you and me was perambulatin' down inside the earth."

A moment later the astounded group was exclaiming over the jewels of the long-dead Spanish princess. Briefly, Hatfield told them how the gems had been recovered.

"Slaven," he continued, "you and Don Nick have got a fortune under yore feet, but yuh'll need money to develop the mines and turn the river back this way to provide water. I advise yuh to take Ramon and his pretties in as a partner. The jewels will bring enough to provide workin' capital. What yuh say?"

"I say, fine!" Wirt Slaven exclaimed heartily. "What you say, Don?"

The *hidalgo* held out his hand, and Slaven grasped it. At the same instant Rena seized Ramon Estrada's fingers across her father's and Don Nicalosa's outstretched arms.

"A crossed hand-shake!" the Ranger chuckled. "Accordin' to the old superstition, that means a weddin'. Well, that'll help keep all the money in the family . . . Now, I'm goin' into the house and clean up a bit and get a coupla hours sleep. I am tired and I gotta be ridin' tonight."

"And you must all stay here for the rest of the day," Don Nicalosa told the others. "We will feast and make merry. . . ."

ACTION THRILLS ON EVERY PAGE

in our Companion Western Magazines

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THRILLING WESTERN
POPULAR WESTERN
WEST
THRILLING RANCH STORIES
RANGE RIDERS WESTERN
THE RIO KID WESTERN
EXCITING WESTERN
MASKED RIDER WESTERN

•

NOW ON SALE AT ALL STANDS

LATE that evening they all sat on the veranda, watching the full moon rise over the eastern wall of the valley. Old Wirt asked a question.

"Hatfield, how'd yuh catch onto Hartsook and his outfit in the first place?"

The Ranger chuckled. "Funny thing, mighty little thing, too. The way he struck a match."

"The way he struck a match?" Old Wirt looked goggle-eyed.

"Uh-huh," Jim Hatfield nodded. "He posed as a cattleman who'd been a cattleman all his life. Well, it shore looked funny to me for a cattleman in overalls and sittin' beside a rough board table to hoist up his foot and strike a match on the sole of his boot. That's what yuh'd expect from a city man who didn't want to put a mark on good furniture or the seat of a nice pair of pants. But I never did see a cowboy strike a match on his boot sole.

"And right then I was lookin' for some jigger that come from east of the Pecos—a feller who would be likely to carry a short-barreled thirty-two-twenty gun in a shoulder holster. I'd shot that kind of a gun outa an hombre's hand the night before, hombre that tried to drygulch me.

"Right then, too, I thought it funny that a jigger would be wearin' heavy riding gloves in the house on a real warm day, like Hartsook was doin' at the time. He was careful to keep the right one on even when he rolled and lit the cigarette, and I felt pretty shore that the feller I shot at the night before had a bullet mark on his right hand. And yuh'll recollect, Don Nicalosa, that when we was holed up in that cabin that the masked jigger that held a gun on us lit a cigarette. Well, *he* struck a match on the sole of his boot. Also, he talked a funny mixture of range and city talk, and yuh'll recollect, too, that Clem said the feller that bossed the runnin' off of yore cattle was a short, husky jigger with a hoarse voice. Which pretty well described Shorty, the hellion I had the run-in with out on the desert the day I hit this neck of the woods."

"Feller, yuh shore don't miss any bets," Wirt Slaven commented admiringly.

"Then I got the return address off a letter that come through the Saba post office to Sanderson," Hatfield went on. "I got in touch with Cap Bill and he began tracin' back on the members of the Louisiana sulphur firm. Tyin' up Watson and Sanchos was easy, and from the description of Hendricks, Watson's partner, and the fact that Watson and John Hardin left the penitentiary together, he was pretty shore that Hendricks, Hardin, and Hartsook was all the same man. That's a slip-up owlhoots almost always make. They take names that are sorta alike. Sanchos—Sanderson, for instance."

"But Hardin, the Devil River outlaw, was s'posed to be killed in El Paso after he got outa jail," Wirt Slaven objected.

"Gettin' killed in lotsa places is a sorta habit with owlhoots like him," Hatfield replied sourly. "Seems that Hardin changed clothes with a murdered man, left papers and things in his pockets. I reckon nobody cared much, anyhow, and it was took for granted that the dead man really was John Wesley Hardin. I got a notion, though, he'll stay dead this time!"

HE stood up, stretching his long arms.

"They aimed to make it look like Don Nicalosa was behind the devil raisin' that was goin' on hereabouts," he went on, "but they made it just a mite too obvious to be convincin', according to my way of lookin' at things. I did sorta have an eye on him at first, though. Because of the yarn about him wantin' Slaven's spread so bad when he first showed up in Ghost Valley."

"It was the old mission house I wanted," Don Nicalosa said gently. "It had been the dream of my life some day to take holy orders. I wished to rebuild the old mission and reestablish it here for my old friend in Mexico, the Franciscan."

"You can have it!" Wirt Slaven spoke up promptly. "I don't want to sleep in the blasted place again. I'll build me a new ranchhouse farther up the valley and you can have yore mission."

Again the two men solemnly shook hands. Hatfield smiled down at them from his great height as a patter of hoofs sounded in the yard.

"There comes the wrangler with Goldy, all set to travel," he said. "Well, *adios,* folks. I gotta amble over east and make a report to Cap Bill. I understand he's got another little chore for me. Yeah, I'm ridin' right now. It'll be cooler crossin' the desert by moonlight."

He rode away, tall and straight on his great golden horse, turning to wave a last farewell. He had come into a welter of hate and fear and despair. He left behind him peace and friendship and happiness securely foundationed on the rock of Ranger justice. With full hearts the little group watched him him go.

"He is one with those grand old adventurers, those men of blood and iron—Sebastian, Coronado, Stephen, Cabeza de Vaca—who first rode the plains of Texas," Ramon Estrada said softly. "He rides with them tonight."

And to the watching group it seemed that suddenly the moonlit trail was lined with shadowy figures in plumed helmets and coats of burnished mail, who held high their shining swords in salute to the tall rider of the golden horse and hailed him comrade—those grand and glorious ones, high of heart and great of soul, who long before had ridden the Last Trail to the Master of the Workmen with the tally of their work.

NEXT ISSUE'S COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH ACTION NOVEL

OUTLAW VALLEY

STARRING RANGER JIM HATFIELD AT HIS FIGHTING BEST

For tender skin and beard that's tough
Those Thin Gillettes sure have the stuff!
You look well-groomed—save dough and time—
Four in a package cost a dime!
Top quality at rock-bottom price
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
Gillette
ALSO NEW ECONOMY PACK 12 for 27c
4 for 10c
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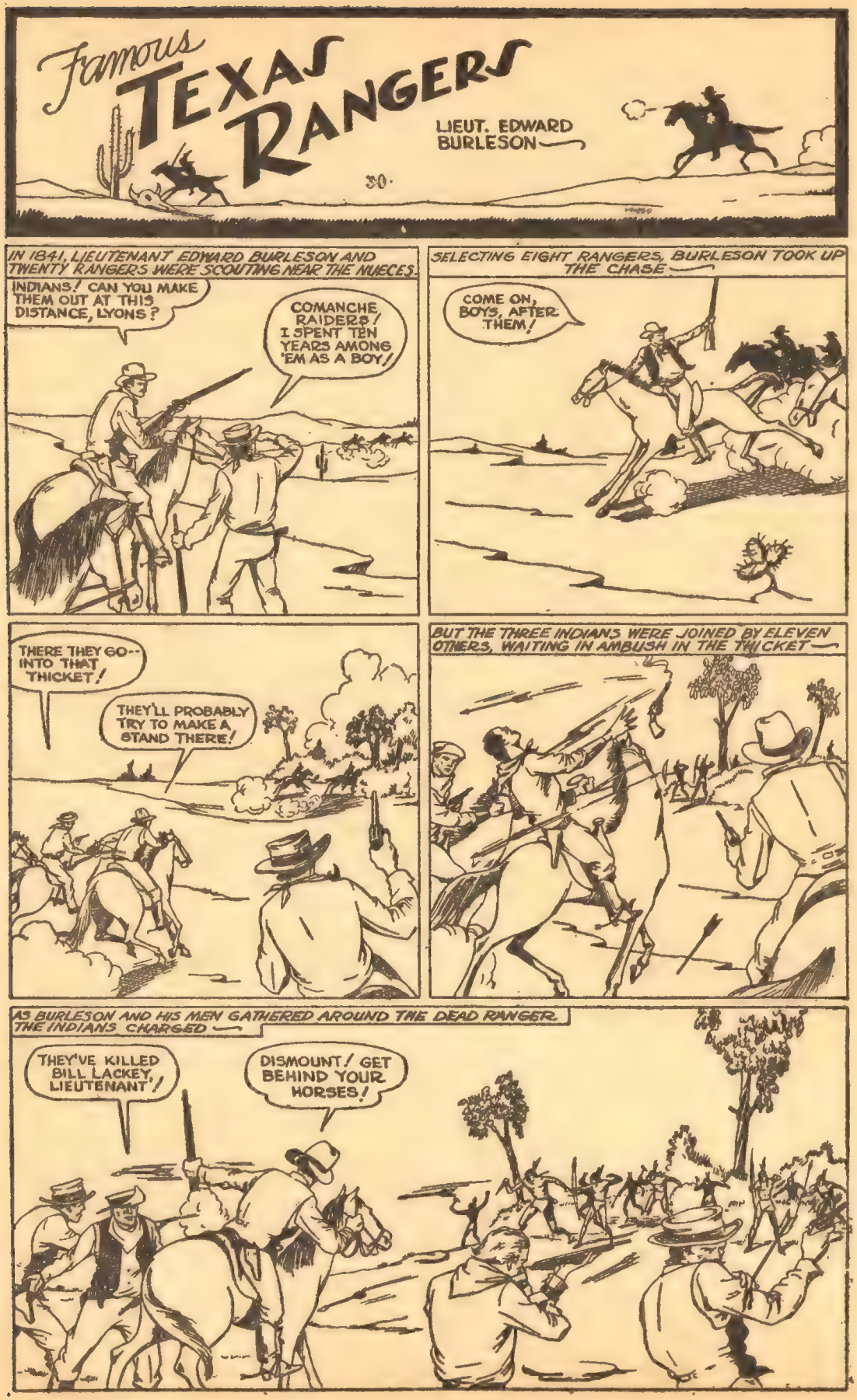
The Thin Gillette Blade Is Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade


Famous TEXAS RANGERS
LIEUT. EDWARD BURLESON
30
IN 1841, LIEUTENANT EDWARD BURLESON AND TWENTY RANGERS WERE SCOUTING NEAR THE NUECES.
INDIANS! CAN YOU MAKE THEM OUT AT THIS DISTANCE, LYONS?
COMANCHE RAIDERS! I SPENT TEN YEARS AMONG 'EM AS A BOY!
SELECTING EIGHT RANGERS, BURLESON TOOK UP THE CHASE
COME ON, BOYS, AFTER THEM!
THERE THEY GO--INTO THAT THICKET!
THEY'LL PROBABLY TRY TO MAKE A STAND THERE!
BUT THE THREE INDIANS WERE JOINED BY ELEVEN OTHERS, WAITING IN AMBUSH IN THE THICKET
AS BURLESON AND HIS MEN GATHERED AROUND THE DEAD RANGER, THE INDIANS CHARGED
THEY'VE KILLED BILL LACKEY, LIEUTENANT!
DISMOUNT! GET BEHIND YOUR HORSES!

A DESPERATE HAND TO HAND BATTLE FOLLOWED
BURLESON FOUGHT A KNIFE DUEL
BURLESON FINALLY KILLED THE COMANCHE
LIEUT. BURLESON THEN WENT TO THE RESCUE OF RANGER ALBERT TOM
COMING AL!
AS BURLESON AND TOM FINISHED OFF THE FOUR COMANCHES, RANGER LYONS CAME RUNNING UP
I UNDERSTAND THEIR LANGUAGE. THEY'RE WHIPPED! THEY'RE GOING TO MAKE A BREAK FOR THE THICKET!
THANKS, LIEUTENANT, I WAS PLENTY TUCKERED!
AS THE SURVIVING INDIANS MADE A DASH FOR THE THICKET, THE RANGERS SHOT THEM DOWN. TWO RANGERS WERE KILLED
ANOTHER GOES TO THE HAPPY HUNTING GROUNDS!
GET EVERY ONE OF THE VARMINTS, BOYS!
IN THE NEXT ISSUE ··· ANOTHER THRILLING TEXAS RANGER ADVENTURE IN PICTURES

LONG SAM PAYS TOLL

By LEE BOND

Author of "Long Sam Buys a House," "Long Sam Keeps a Promise," etc.

Littlejohn Forgets His Own Owlhoot Troubles in Grim Battle Against Sinister Highway Robbers!

LOSING time or being seen by other human beings were two of the most dangerous things "Long Sam" Littlejohn could have done. Yet he was forced to do both of those things at the same time.

Numbed by the fatigue of over twenty hours without food or sleep, Littlejohn was riding slumped forward over the pommel of his hand-tooled black saddle when his bloodshot eyes saw the grim barrier ahead. The barrier was a tall gate of weathered planks that spanned the dusty road. There was a buggy halted at the gate. A woman sat on the buggy seat, talking with a short, heavy man who stood with a double-barreled shotgun tucked under one arm.

Long Sam Littlejohn's unusually lank frame straightened with a jerk. Uneasiness stung his fatigue-clouded brain to full alertness.

Outlawed, with two thousand dollars in rewards offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Littlejohn had to be mighty careful about approaching other people. Badge men were bad

"Well, runt, yuh sorta caught me nappin' this time," Long Sam grunted

enough, to be sure. But the type of citizen who would kill or capture an outlaw for the reward that outlaw's apprehension might bring was more dangerous than the average peace officer. Something about the squatty gent at the gate gave Littlejohn a chilly feeling despite the brassy hotness of the Texas sun.

The gaunt, yellow-haired outlaw had dropped into this fertile valley just at daylight. That had been three hours ago, and in that length of time he had skirted past a dozen or more farms and ranches. Somewhere on his back trail was Joe Fry, deputy U. S. marshal. Littlejohn, starved and weary though he was, had kept out of sight of ranchmen, cowboys and farmers, because to have stopped and asked for food for himself and his leg-weary horse would have made Joe Fry's trailing chore much simpler.

As it was, Fry would stop at house after house all along the valley, asking questions about strangers who had passed through. That would slow Fry down a lot, and Littlejohn had figured on getting to Vista Del Rio town, and across the muddy Rio Grande to the safety of Mexico. But maybe that would not be so easy now, he thought uneasily. There was something mighty queer about that massive gate being out here in the sticks.

Littlejohn's bloodshot eyes became smoke-colored slits as he squinted against the sun's hot glare. He studied the thorn-armored wall of tornillo and prickly pear that stretched solidly away from the gate to the right and to the left. He knew his Texas brush country well enough to see at a glance that there was no hope of flanking past the gate on either side.

THE outlaw swore through wind-cracked lips, began slowing the ewe-necked, splay-footed old roan he called Sleeper. The man at the gate was arguing with the woman in the buggy. Then Littlejohn's eyes saw the sign, tacked to the post at the free end of the gate. He read in arrangement:

Toll Rates:
Riders, two bits.
Rigs, four bits.
Cattle, five dollars per head.
Sheep and hogs, two dollars a head.

Littlejohn was stiffly erect in the saddle now, surprised out of his weariness and hunger. A toll-gate here in this lonely spot was fantastic enough, but those rates for passage through the gate, especially for cattle, were enough to jolt any man.

The outlaw's amazed eyes left the sign, to study the man who stood there at the gate. That shotgun-armed fellow was obviously there to collect outrageous prices for toll. And the fellow looked tough enough to get the job done. He was shaggy and dark, and packed a holstered six-shooter besides the shotgun.

Littlejohn saw the sheen of small black eyes in a badly pock-marked face as the gate tender glanced toward him. But the pock-marked man seemed uninterested in the gaunt, black-clad rider who was easing toward the halted buggy.

The woman in the buggy was talking in a strained, pleading voice. Her words sent a new current of alertness tingling through Long Sam Littlejohn.

"Toby Rust, you simply have to let me through!" the woman was saying. "I've told you that my father is very ill. Dr. Arnold left this prescription, which I must have filled immediately."

The woman waved a small square of paper. Her trim figure, and the tone of her voice, told Long Sam Littlejohn that she was young. He could not see her face, because she wore a checked gingham sunbonnet that matched her dress. The dress and bonnet were both faded, faded from many washings, but were starched and neat. The buggy was old, rickety. The breast-strap harness on the fat brown mare between the shafts had been mended in many places. Long Sam Littlejohn's puckered eyes took in those things as he approached the rear of the buggy.

"You know the rules, gal," the man who had been called Toby Rust

sneered. "Fork over four bits, or head back to that Tippin' T layout of yore pa's."

"But I can't get the money until I get to town!" The girl sounded desperate. "Please, Toby, do be reasonable."

"I was gonna make yuh a kind of bargain, Mildred." Toby Rust grinned slyly. "I aimed to let yuh through for a kiss, since yuh ain't got any money. But here comes somethin' dressed fer a funeral, so I reckon the deal is off."

"There'll come a day when Dode McCloud and you toughs who work for him will not dare insult every decent woman you meet, Toby Rust!" the girl said spiritedly.

But Rust was paying no attention to her now. His round, hard eyes were glittering and ugly as he slid the shotgun down his forearm until the weapon was ready for a quick upswing.

"Get back in line, yuh long-shanked son!" he said flatly. "People take their turn at this gate. That includes you, too."

Long Sam Littlejohn had ridden forward, passing close to the rig. He spoke a low word that halted Sleeper, instead of reining back as he had been ordered. Littlejohn glanced down and sideward at the girl, who was looking up at him in some surprise.

She was, the outlaw decided instantly, a dog-goned pretty girl. He saw soft dark hair beneath the sunbonnet, and found big, dark eyes studying him from a delicately tanned face that had a saucy little nose and full red lips.

THE girl lowered her glance quickly, and Long Sam looked back at Toby Rust, who had taken a threatening step forward.

"Can't yuh hear nothin', cow nurse?" Rust blared. "I told yuh to get back in line. Want a batch of blue whistlers in yore briskit?"

"Save yore buckshot, Rust," Long Sam advised quietly. "Miss Mildred was so worried about her pa that she plumb forgot to fetch money with her. I brought the money."

Long Sam heard the girl's quick intake of breath, and hoped grimly that she would not speak before she thought the matter over. She didn't. Toby Rust was scowling more fiercely than ever as Long Sam held out a silver dollar. The pock-marked man made no move to accept the coin.

"Since when did old Otis Tyler get able to afford a hired hand?" he demanded.

His hard, black eyes stabbed at the girl as he spoke. Her name, Littlejohn knew now, was Mildred Tyler. He glanced at her, hoping she would not betray the fact that they were complete strangers to each other. He saw her small hands grip the buggy mare's reins tightly, saw her head tilt proudly.

"I suppose my father should run to Dode McCloud and ask permission to hire a rider!" she said haughtily.

"Mebbe he ought to, at that," Rust retorted.

"Dode McCloud and this toll gate of his may have we Lost Padre Valley people badly hampered, but we're not whipped yet," Mildred Tyler said sharply. "We may, as a matter of fact, find a way of stopping McCloud's robbing us with this gate."

"So that's it!" Toby Rust said musingly. "This bean-pole of a feller, here, looks like he might figger hisself to be a tough hand. Yore daddy has set out to hire fighters, has he?"

"Never mind that," Long Sam said flatly. "Take this money, Rust, and open yore gate."

"Sa-aa-y, who do yuh think yuh are?" Rust bristled.

Long Sam's bony face tightened. He slowly drew his hand back, pocketed the dollar. He began humming softly through his teeth, and the tune he hummed was a dismal range dirge. He studied Rust intently as he hummed.

The squatty Rust's lips curled, his mean eyes became ugly.

Anyone who knew Long Sam Littlejohn even passably well could have told Toby Rust that plenty was due to pop when the gaunt outlaw began humming that funereal music. But Rust did not know that. He took the

tall tow-head's humming as a sign of uneasiness.

"Not so salty after all, are yuh?" he sneered. "But I want yore name, so's I can tell the boss who Otis Tyler has hired."

Long Sam stopped humming. "The name," he said quietly, "is Littlejohn, Rust. Most folks call me Long Sam. Mebbe yuh've heard the name mentioned."

Toby Rust certainly had heard of Long Sam Littlejohn, outlaw and gunfighter. Rust's pock-marked face turned pale, and his crooked jaw sagged open.

Mildred Tyler made a funny little squeaking sound, but Long Sam did not dare glance around to see how she was acting. Obviously enough she, too, had heard of him.

Toby Rust was staring at the black-butted guns that rode Long Sam's thighs in hand-tooled black holsters as if he had noticed them for the first time?"

"Yuh had to get nosey, Rust, so yuh don't get any pay now," Littlejohn said flatly. "Get that gate open. Or do yuh want to get paid with these?"

AS Long Sam uttered the last words something happened that Toby Rust never understood. Littlejohn's long, bony hands had been crossed on he saddle-horn before him. The next instant each of those hands was holding a black-butted six-shooter. The .45s looked down at Toby Rust like two deadly, unwinking eyes. Littlejohn was humming his favorite dirge again as his thumbs pulled the spiked hammers of those guns back to full cock.

Toby Rust leaned over, and carefully stood his shotgun against a bush beside the road. His thick legs were trembling under him as he turned around and swung the big gate open.

"All right, Miss," Littlejohn said to the girl. "Roll on through. Mind if I overtake yuh along the road after a bit and ask a few questions about this here toll-gate?"

"Please do overtake me, Mr. Littlejohn." The girl smiled at him timidly. "Perhaps by then I can have thought up words to express my thanks to you."

She clucked to the mare, and the buggy clattered down the lane that had been hacked through the massed growth of brush and pear.

"Yuh-yuh ain't goin'?" Rust asked uneasily.

"Yeah, I'm ridin' on to Vista Del Rio," Littlejohn admitted. "But not until I've borrowed that six-shooter of yores. Yuh're the kind of a slimy snake that'd put a bullet in my back for the reward on my scalp."

Long Sam dismounted, pulled the gun from Rust's holster, and threw the six-shooter far out into the thickets. He dismantled Rust's shotgun, threw the barrels one direction, the breech another, and the force end still another.

"That, I reckon, clips yore stinger," he said gruffly. "And when that girl comes back, Rust you let her through this gate without any argument. If yuh don't, I'll come back out this way and teach yuh some manners."

He mounted, touched Sleeper with dull rowels, and rode past the scowling gate guard.

Long Sam overtook the buggy a few minutes later.

"You look tired, Mr. Littlejohn," the girl greeted him. "I noticed it back there at the gate. Wouldn't it rest you if you rode in the buggy with me?"

"That's mighty fine of yuh, Miss," the outlaw told her gratefully. "I'd like to ride on them buggy cushions. And this pony of mine would like to be rid of my weight a spell, too."

The girl stopped, and Long Sam swung out of the saddle, leaving the weary roan's reins looped to the saddle-horn. The outlaw crawled up into the buggy, sank back wearily against the sun-cracked cushions. The rig moved down the road once more, Sleeper keeping pace with the mare.

"I'm very much indebted to you, Mr. Littlejohn, for helping me out of the fix I was in back there," Mildred Tyler said seriously.

'Forget it," the outlaw told her. "What about that gate, anyhow?"

"The story is as simple as it is mean and unfair." The girl sighed. Dode McCloud wanted a foothold in Lost Padre Valley, which lies north of the gate."

"I rode down through a mighty nice lookin' valley this morning to reach that gate," Long Sam told her.

"That's Lost Padre." She nodded. "It is as fertile and productive as it looks. There are twenty-odd ranchmen and farmers in the valley. When Dode McCloud tried to come in there, my father, Otis Tyler, got the other cattlemen and even the farmers to balk McCloud by refusing to sell him land. McCloud practically owns and does completely control Vista Del Rio. He's mean, bullying and grasping. Dad knew that McCloud would soon rule the whole valley just as he rules Vista Del Rio if he ever got half a chance."

LITTLEJOHN'S eyes were narrowed, thoughtfully.

"But McCloud is also smart," he mused. "He bought land there at the mouth of yore valley, put up his tollgate, and has got you valley people between a rock and a hard place."

"He's breaking us," the girl said gravely.

"Why don't yuh go to some other town to trade, and to sell yore stock?" the outlaw demanded.

"Because there are no other towns," the girl answered simply. "Silver Lake is the closest one. It lies seventy miles north and west, and there's no trail through the hills to it."

"In other words, McCloud shore has got you folks sewed up." Littlejohn nodded. "What is he? I mean what does he do besides run over other people roughshod?"

"Dode McCloud owns, among practically all the other paying enterprises in Vista Del Rio, the Quien Sabe Gambling Hall," Mildred informed. "Dad swears every game in the place is as crooked as can be."

"A gent like McCloud wouldn't give anybody a fair shake, I reckon," Long Sam muttered. "But that kind of an hombre usually stubs his toe sooner or later. How about yore local law? Can't yuh get help from that quarter?"

"Jay Keeson is the sheriff." The girl sounded grim. "Jay Keeson was nothing but a small-time cow thief until Dode McCloud boosted him into the sheriff's office."

"Nice set-up, for brother McCloud," Long Sam grunted.

He fell silent, stealing a glance at the girl's pretty young face. She was deeply troubled. It showed in the tightness about her full, soft lips, in the way her eyes moved nervously over the road ahead, and the way her small hands were clutched too tightly over the reins.

Maybe, if a man who had seen more gun trouble than he cared to think about got to nosing around this Dode McCloud and sorta crowded McCloud out into the open with his crooked dealings scattered all around for folks to look at . . . Long Sam silently cursed himself for entertaining such a thought.

It would be a pleasure to help Mildred Tyler and the rest of those honest people out yonder in Lost Padre Valley, sure. But an hombre by the name of Long Sam Littlejohn already had a batch of trouble riding his shirttail, and the thing to do was push into friendly Old Mexico, where a man could bed down and sleep all the aches out of his bones without having a human bloodhound like Joe Fry to worry about.

The thing to do was swim Sleeper across the Rio Grande and find one of those friendly little villages where a gringo with money in his pockets could buy food and drink and maybe flirt a little with pretty señoritas. Sticking on this side of the river and getting into trouble just because a pretty girl was needing some help would be downright foolish. A man had to think of his own hide, or—

"Vista Del Rio."

Mildred's voice broke in on Long Sam's thoughts. He hadn't realized that his eyes were closed, and that he was practically asleep until she spoke.

He sat up with a jerk, looking quickly ahead. He saw the town, a sizable sprawl of adobe houses and

business buildings strung along one somewhat crooked street. Vista Del Rio looked cleaner than most Border towns. And less than a quarter of a mile beyond was the Rio Grande, its turgid waters gleaming in the hot sun.

"Better let me out, Miss Mildred," Littlejohn told her. "Bein' seen in the company of a scallawag like me won't help yore reputation any."

"Pouf!" she scoffed, and whipped the mare into a brisk trot.

MILDRED smiled at Long Sam in a way that made him wonder glumly if he would keep his good resolutions to cross the river to where a bounty-plastered outlaw ought to go.

The girl swung the mare in at a hitch-rack before a small building that housed a drug-store, and Long Sam hopped out, helped the girl alight.

"Thanks for the ride, little lady," he said quietly. "And I hope yore pa gets well real soon."

Mildred gave him her slim hand, and was thanking him for helping her pass through the toll gate. But Long Sam was not listening too attentively. He saw the Quien Sabe, only a few doors beyond the drug-store. And a big, well-dressed man was coming out of the Quien Sabe, talking to the loafers who were gawking toward Long Sam and the girl. The big fellow was red-headed, and had a strutty air about him as he started briskly along the walk.

"Well, well!" he boomed. "Look who honors Vista Del Rio with a visit. How's my little sweetheart, eh?"

The man's brazenness, plus the fact that he fairly shone with prosperity, was all the introduction Long Sam Littlejohn needed. In a town ruled by only one man, that ruler would be the only one who would dare make such a brazen play as the big, sleek redhead was making. That the fellow was Dode McCloud, Long Sam did not doubt for a second. And he found himself taking instant, almost violent, dislike to McCloud.

The big man was barging straight toward Mildred Tyler, thick lips grinning mockingly at her, rust-flecked eyes looking at her in a manner that had turned her cheeks scarlet.

Littlejohn moved to such a position that Dode McCloud would have to detour in his rush to reach Mildred Tyler. McCloud flicked him with a contemptuous glance.

"One side," McCloud snorted, and shoved a big hand toward Long Sam's chest.

The gaunt outlaw shifted before that thick hand could send him sprawling. Long Sam was humming as his own right hand moved. But that right hand was balled into a knobby, sun-burned fist that sounded like a meat ax in action when it landed flush on Dode McCloud's broad chin. McCloud's highly polished boots left the dirt walk, his big body turned slowly half around, and he came down on the front of his fancy vest. Dust flew from under Dode McCloud.

Mildred Tyler uttered a startled cry, and amazed voices rank all along the street.

"Go ahead into the druggist's place and have that prescription filled, Miss," Long Sam said quietly to the wide-eyed and trembling girl.

He blew on his knuckles, began humming his doleful tune again.

Dode McCloud was pushing himself up on brawny arms. His red hair was a wild tangle above his dirt-smeared face, and there was a look of dazed disbelief in his rust-flecked eyes. He remained on his hands and knees until understanding came to him. He sprang up then, raging.

"Yuh locoed sandhill crane, I'll show yuh somethin' about fist fightin'!" he bawled.

McCloud came in at a shuffling crouch, big fists cocked, head pulled down between massive shoulders. Long Sam knew that he was up against a trained fighter when he saw that expert guard and the neat foot work. And the outlaw knew that his only hope of saving himself from a severe beating was to go on the offensive while Dode McCloud was still shaken from that punch.

Shouts were ringing throughout the town, feet were hammering the hard dirt walks. Mildred Tyler was saying something in a frightened voice. But Long Sam had no time to listen to the girl, or determine the temper of the crowd that was forming so swiftly.

His lean arms came up, driving those big, knobby fists in a flurry of feeler punches that Dode McCloud took on forearms and shoulders. McCloud's left slid out in a snaky punch that caught Long Sam on the forehead, ripping the black Stetson from his head and making his brain spin.

The outlaw back pedaled in time to escape a smoking right that would have knocked him, he figured, halfway across the street. Then he was humming that dirge through coldly grinning lips, and instead of giving ground he was boring in, taking full advantage of his unusually long reach.

He slipped one through McCloud's guard that brought a profane snarl from the big man, and started his nose bleeding. Long Sam rode back on a jab that made his whole chest throb, then landed a right cross that had his weight behind it. McCloud staggered, and for a second his guard was down. And that second was all Long Sam Littlejohn needed. He nailed McCloud at the base of the jaw with a hay-maker that finished the fight. McCloud wilted like a wet sack, out cold.

Long Sam pulled air into his aching lungs, fully aware that he had had an awful lot of luck. He realized for the first time that the street was deathly quiet—that the crowd was watching him in a tense, peculiar manner. He stepped back—and felt the hard, round muzzle of a gun prod his spine.

"Lift 'em, Sammy!" a raspy voice ordered.

Long Sam laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound. Slowly, his skinned hands lifted until they were level with his shoulders. He felt the guns slipped out of his holsters, then a small man was beside him.

The little man wore a checkered suit of store clothes, buttoned shoes, and a rusty black derby. His steel-trapmouth was shut on the frayed stub of a cigar, and there was a grim sort of pleasure gleaming in his hard gray eyes. The derby-wearing man looked like a drummer. But he was Joe Fry, deputy U. S. marshal, and rated one of the keenest man-hunters in the Southwest.

"Well, runt, yuh sorta caught me nappin' this time," Long Som grunted. "Mind if I put my hands down?"

"Yuh wasn't exactly nappin', as I seen it," Fry answered. Yuh're better with them mitts of yores than I figgered. Yeah, put yore hands down. But don't get notions. My temper ain't too good, after the chase yuh give me."

Long Sam lowered his hands, and glanced down at Mildred Tyler, who had come to his side. The girl's face was deathly pale, and tears stood hot and bright in her eyes. She looked levelly at Joe Fry.

"I suppose you feel very proud of yourself, Mr. Fry," she said evenly. "I've heard of you, and know that you are an officer of the law. But sneaking up behind Mr. Littlejohn as you just did and arresting him was cowardly.

"You look like too nice a girl to be wastin' sympathy on this long-legged mail robber and hoss thief," Fry retorted. "You trot along now, young lady, and no more of yore sass."

"But it's my fault that you captured Mr. Littlejohn!" the girl cried. "He was fighting Dode McCloud because McCloud was fresh with me. Besides, I don't believe Long Sam Littlejohn is a mail robber or a horse thief. He's a gentleman, which is more than can be said for you."

FRY turned beet-red, and almost bit his cigar in two. Long Sam's snicker did not help his feelings, either.

"Now, Fry, yuh know where yuh stand." The outlaw chuckled. "At that, yuh ought to tip that fool thing yuh use for a hat when yuh meet a lady. And don't order ladies around if yuh want to have 'em like yuh.

Yore manners, Joseph, are plumb shockin'."

"Shut up!" Fry ordered angrily. "And head west down this street. I seen a jail down that way."

"I'm terribly sorry about this," Mildred Tyler told Long Sam tearfully. "If you hadn't tried to help me—"

"Shucks, girl, don't worry about me." Long Sam smiled. "Fry will get chicken-hearted and turn me loose. I'll likely see yuh before yuh pull out of town with that medicine for yore pa."

"Quit soft-soapin' the gal and rattle yore clod-hoppers," Frey snapped. "Shore, I'll turn yuh loose—in the Federal pen."

Mildred Tyler fled into the druggist's shop, sobbing brokenly.

Long Sam sighed, glanced at Dode McCloud. A tall, sallow man with a ropy black mustache and pale, merciless eyes was squatting beside McCloud, looking up at Long Sam. A short, moon-faced fellow with yellow eyes and too much mouth even for his broad face sauntered up, said something to the sallow man. They began lifting McCloud, who was muttering incoherently.

Littlejohn turned, picked up his hat, and plodded away along the dirt walk, Joe Fry close behind him. After a short walk, they turned into a dingy building that was combination sheriff's office and jail. The sheriff's office was a buzzard-nest, foul; and the jail beyond it, with its double row of mean little cells, had a steaming, unhealthy feel to it.

"Take that open cell on yore left, tall feller," Fry ordered.

Long Sam turned into the cell.

Fry caught the door that was made of upright iron bars, with his free left hand.

"Back up!" he growled. "I ain't takin no chances on yuh jumpin' me, yuh tricky hellion!"

Long Sam had had no idea of starting anything. But Fry's obvious uneasiness gave him the notion. He backed away from the door, but was careful in judging his distance. The steaming hot cell was already bringing sweat from his pores, and he sleeved his face as Fry began cautiously pushing the door shut.

"Hey, Runt, I'll boil alive in this hole," the outlaw grumbled. "How long yuh figger to leave me here before yuh take me to come decent jail?"

"Yuh're roostin' here until I can catch up on my eatin' and sleepin'," Fry snorted. "I'm so fagged out I can't . . . Owwww!"

Fry's voice ended in a howl of pained surprise.

Long Sam's lengthy left leg had lashed out, his big boot driving hard against the door bars. The door slapped Joe Fry down, and knocked the gun from his hand. Long Sam went through the door like a puma quitting a cage.

Fry was on all fours, clawing frantically for the gun he had lost and gagging over the cigar stub he had all but swallowed. Long Sam seized him by the seat and scruff, flung him into the cell, then slammed and locked the door. Fry got rid of the cigar stub, jumped to his feet, and lunged against the bars with all his might. Long Sam grinned at him, listened a minute to the deputy's blistering tirade, then turned, whistling as he sauntered down the corridor.

HE got his guns from the sheriff's desk-top where he had seen Fry put them on the way in. He holstered the weapons, moved to the door, and peeked cautiously out. Sleeper, he saw, was still standing by Mildred Tyler's buggy. And Joe Fry was raising such a holler that speed was better than caution. Long Sam hopped out the door and went for his horse as fast as hard muscles could propel him.

People along the street had already heard Joe Fry's yelling. But surprise held them gaping as they watched the gaunt, black-clad outlaw sprint to the ugly old roan, go into the saddle without touching a stirrup.

Sleeper, Long Sam knew, was too tired to make much of a run. But it was not far to the sluggish yellow river. Sleeper could do that dash in good shape, even if he was tired. Then

there would be the feel of cool water —and the blessed safety of Mexico.

Sleeper, wise in the ways of a master who had to go places in a hurry most of the time, was already in motion. But the Quien Sabe doors flapped open, and big Dode McCloud stepped out on the walk, his battered face swinging to the sound of Sleeper's hoofs.

McCloud bawled something, jerked a six-shooter, and threw a bullet past Long Sam's head. The lank outlaw crouched low, pulled his own guns, and dug Sleeper in the ribs with dull spurs. McCloud was jumping around in excitement, his gun spewing the second shot.

Long Sam felt the bullet rake across his bent back like the touch of a hot iron. He threw a shot at McCloud, but the motion of his running horse spoiled his aim. Then the moon-faced fellow and the sallow, mustached one who had picked McCloud up out of the dirt were jumping out the Quien Sabe door, their hands plucking guns from leather.

"Drop that hoss!" McCloud's voice rolled out heavily. "Shoot that crow-bait from under him!"

McCloud fired as he yelled. But Long Sam had already swung Sleeper sharply to the right.

The tall outlaw kicked his feet out of stirrups and rolled backwards over Sleeper's slanted hips. He hit the dirt on his side, rolled a yard or so, and slewed around to face the Quien Sabe.

Dode McCloud and his two gunmen evidently thought McCloud's last shot had scored. They jumped off the sidewalk, started running out into the street. Long Sam spat out a mouthful of sand, and began humming his favorite dismal tune through his long nose.

"Hey, he's lookin' at us!" the moon-faced gunman squalled. "Mebbe we better—"

The gunman was skidding to a halt as he yelled, his pudgy right fist whipping up a cocked gun. Long Sam shot Moon-face through the belly, slithered sideward, and jerked to his feet.

He had lost his hat, and was dirt all over. But there was nothing in those smoky eyes to hamper their keenness, and rooting dirt had not crippled the gaunt tow-head's gun speed. He winced when a bullet tore across his right shoulder tip, but kept up the dismal humming. His gun blasted double thunder, and when he stepped out from behind the fog of powder smoke, the man with the black mustache was nosing over, lifeless hands spilling double guns.

A bullet ripped into Long Sam's left thigh, staggering him. But he kept his feet, and his humming grew suddenly louder as his guns began a roaring song of death.

DODE McCLOUD jerked and swayed and shuddered, his big, tough body absorbing the shock of four fatal slug before his knees bent, and the gun in his hand sagged earthward. Even then, his knees half bent, his body listed far to the right, McCloud stayed up long enough to curse Long Sam bitterly through paling lips.

"Yore toll-gate stirred this whole thing up, McCloud," Littlejohn said tonelessly. "But I reckon I've paid yuh in the kind of coin yuh've had comin' for a long time."

McCloud fell then, and from the walks came an awed throng that circled Long Sam slowly. He watched them, humming, smoky eyes alert.

"Anybody aim to take up where McCloud left off?" he asked coldly.

"Gosh, no, son!" a runty oldster shrilled. "Yuh've jest pulled a wolf from the throat of this whole country, young feller."

Through the roar of approval that followed, Long Sam heard Mildred Tyler's voice. He looked around, found the girl almost beside him. She was big-eyed and white-faced, staring at the blood that was making sodden spots on his shoulder and thigh.

"You're hurt!" she choked. "I'll help you over to Dr. Arnold's office."

"Joe Fry gave yuh some good advice when he told yuh not to worry about me, Mildred." Long Sam smiled

down at her, holstering his guns. "I'm skinned up a little, but it's nothin' serious," he went on. "Besides, if I stuck around here, that sheriff of yores would come along, somebody would let Joe Fry out of the cell I put him in, and I'd shore have a batch of grief with two badge men bellerin 'around me. So my Sleeper hoss and me will take a little swim, and wind up on yonder side of the river."

"Nobody will let Fry out of that coop," a merchant shouted. "And when that shifty-eyed Jay Keeson shows up here and finds that Dode McCloud is dead, he'll bust down half the brush in Texas a-huntin' a healthier climate. Littlejohn, yuh may may be an outlaw, but this town would publicly hang any gent, lawman or otherwise, that tried to bother yuh. Dode McCloud was ruinin' us all. We couldn't do enough to pay yuh for what yuh've done for us."

The words brought a roar of agreement from the crowd that fairly rattled the town's windows. But Long Sam shook his head, trying not to show that his wounds were dealing him plenty of misery.

"Keepin' Fry in jail would only get you folks in trouble," he said when he could make himself heard. "So here's the key to his cell. I'm set on takin' that swim I mentioned."

He tossed the big key to the nearest man, lifted his hat from the dust, and turned to Sleeper.

Mildred Tyler was suddenly before him, her slim arms reaching up. She pulled his head down, stood on tiptoe, and kissed him full on the lips.

"When it's safe, come to the Tipping T," she whispered.

Long Sam Littlejohn was still red around the ears when Sleeper waded out of the Rio Grande onto Mexican soil.

Next Issue's Novel: OUTLAW VALLEY, by JACKSON COLE

THOUSANDS OF WHISKEY DRINKERS ARE NOW SAYING:

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BRAINS versus BULLETS

By REEVE WALKER

Author of "Poor Shot," "Fixing Cowboy," etc.

Boogered by a Band of Badmen, Fats Macklin and Nevada Jones Break Out in a Rash and Prove That the Microbe Is Mightier Than the Sword!

The outlaw triggered the rifle, drilling the startled owlhooter

"FATS" MACKLIN restrained "Nevada" Jones from poking his homely face above the soapweed and ocatillo bushes in which they crouched. Thereby, Fats saved his mournful pardner from having his thick skull neatly divided by a whistling .45 bullet.

Under the push of Fats' pudgy hand, Nevada's bony, misshapen features were buried in a tangle of gray and green weeds. Nevada kicked out with the longest pair of legs in Utah and grunted angrily.

"Dang you, Fats! Why'd you do that?" he demanded.

Another whining slug from a short gun amputated a thorny ocatillo branch close to Nevada's big ear.

"That's why I done that," Fats wheezed huskily. "An' if we're wantin' to keep our hides fit to hold water, we'll be gettin' outa here pronto. We can't do nothin' for old Decker, an' we'll be buzzard's meat if that Blue Scar outfit rides into the arroyo behind us."

"Yeah?" said Nevada. Then he emitted an oath and a deep groan. "What in tarnation is stingin' me?"

Nevada slapped and dug at his bony

face with one clawed hand. Fats Macklin went kind of sick inside. He hadn't heard any warning buzz, but his long-jointed pardner was suddenly acting as if a hidden rattler had jabbed him with its fangs.

There was some real buzzing in the air then, for several .45s erupted on the creek flats below. Lead screamed into the weedy clump and landed close to Nevada and Fats. But Nevada was paying little attention to the imminent danger of being perforated. He was still clawing at his face and one ear.

Fats hooked one thick, heavy arm around Nevada's shoulders and started both of them rolling down the steep side of the arroyo, up which they had climbed two minutes before. When they landed at the dry bottom of the draw, safe for the moment, Fats looked at Nevada's face.

Nature and Nevada's own mistaken idea that he was a bronc rider had long ago made a mess of his features. Fats now saw that his pardner's long nose, his big ears and his sunken cheeks were swelling and turning a deep red. Nevada was clawing at his face with both hands, and they were likewise taking on the color of ripe tomatoes.

"Of all the times to get yourself messed up with pizen weed!" growled Fats disgustedly. Pretty soon you'll be so swole up, yuh can't see. Let's go! Blue Scar's got our sign. C'mon!"

"Me get messed up?" howled Nevada. "Me? You dang-whanged packrat! You pushed me into them Utah stingers, an—"

Fats cut off Nevada's howl by clapping a pudgy hand over his jaws. Fats could hear rocks rattling under the boots of hombres climbing toward them from the creek flats over the swell of their concealing arroyo.

FATS MACKLIN knew the minute had arrived for some fast maneuvering, if they wanted to escape alive from this particular, sun-blighted section of the painted rock desert. They had been on their way out, lighting a shuck for the county seat of Paint Rock, more than a hundred miles away, when they had heard shots.

Fats and Nevada had intended to drop over onto Devil's Tail Creek to give old Jim Decker a passing hail as they went by. They were riding fresh horses and driving two pack beasts. They planned to tell old Jim Decker they had struck it rich at last, some five miles lower down on this same creek.

Having rock-mounded a monument to their claim, Fats and Nevada were on their way out to register their strike. They also expected to outfit and hire a pair of extra hombres with quick trigger fingers. For the claim-jumping killers headed by the notorious outlaw known as "Blue Scar" Devlin had last been reported working through the southeastern section of the Utah desert.

Within the past five minutes, the report about Blue Scar had been confirmed. Ground-tying their beasts in an arroyo, Fats and Nevada had crawled into the ocatillo and soapweed above just in time to see the last of old Jim Decker. Two heavily bearded men were heaving old Jim's body into the swirling water of Devil's Tail Creek below his claim.

Half a dozen other bandits were busily carting out old Jim's sacked washings and setting fire to his small cabin. It had been at the moment of seeing this that Nevada would have started blasting with his single action old six-gun, but Fats had promptly stopped that.

Fats said they might get one or two of Jim Decker's murderers, but their lone pair of sixes and the Winchesters in their saddle boots down below, could scarcely be expected to match the murderous guns of Blue Scar's killers. But Nevada's movement had been seen, and it had been that which had brought the first lead whining their way.

Fats now coaxed his cursing, groaning pardner onto his feet. By this time, Nevada's black eyes were almost closed. It was evident to Fats that he must have pushed Nevada's face into a virulent Utah variety of stinging nettle when he had saved his life from a bullet two or three minutes before.

"If we can make the hosses, we'll have to cut an' run for it," advised Fats. "Maybe then we can make it into the

malpais an' throw off Blue Scar by travelin' down the arroyo. Even if the claim jumpers didn't figure us to be worth wastin' time on, they wouldn't be honin' to have any witnesses to their killin' poor old Jim."

They were nearing their horses now. Blue Scar's riders had not yet sighted them in the sharply winding draw.

"If'n they follow our sign, I won't even be fitten to shoot at the skunks," groaned Nevada, still rubbing his swollen face.

"Our only chance is that they don't get to their hosses in time to head us off before we hit the malpais," said Fats. "Once we hit them miscolored badlands, it'd take an army to trail us."

Fats referred to the malpais only a mile or so away, an area of broken painted rocks which had often served as a hiding place for bandits, rustlers and those only a few jumps ahead of the law.

BLUE SCAR'S men could be heard in the arroyo as the pardners reached their horses. Fats Macklin was short-jointed and round-bodied. He had a moon face and big, china blue eyes that had fooled a lot of bad hombres in the past. Fats looked kind of dumb, and it was Nevada Jones's confirmed opinion that Fats wasn't really bright.

But then Nevada had a mind that became confused when he tried to think too fast, so Fats never paid any attention to his opinion.

Pack-sacks heavily loaded with rock samples for assay at the county seat were diamond-hitched on the backs of two burros. As they mounted, Fats started the pack burros ahead of them, trying to quirt them out of their morning sleep.

"Dangnation!" groaned Nevada, hauling out his six-gun. "I'm for high-tailin' an' leavin' them burros. Blue Scar'll overhaul us shore as sin, if'n we don't light a shuck faster!"

The dry arroyo was shallow banked, but high enough to conceal the pardners on their horses.

"You locoed fool," Fats said. "If they'd come onto the burros an' the rich chippin's they're totin', Blue Scar'd chase us to tarnation an' gone! Put up that hog-leg, or you'll have 'em down on top o' us!"

Fats figured they would move fast enough to outdistance the killers on foot, and they might slip out while their pursuers were bringing up their horses. The best way into the jumbled malpais lay only a few yards ahead now, where they could easily lose themselves.

Fats saw the slope of the bank where the trail led out. He listened. The sound of pursuit behind them had died out. Fats glanced at his pardner, and a slow grin ornamented his round face.

"You ain't lookin' like anything human, Nevada," he said.

Nevada's whole face was a reddened mass of nettle poison welts. He swore at Fats angrily through his thickened lips.

"I'll be a horned toad if I don't get even with you for shovin' me into them stingers!" he promised. "I'd as soon be meetin' up with that killin' polecat Blue Scar, as to be feelin' like I am—"

A hard, dry voice cracked out from above the edge of the arroyo.

"You've met up with him, pilgrim! Keep yore paws in front of you! All right, boys, loop 'em in!"

Nevada Jones could now see through only one eye. He swore, and started to make a grab for his holstered gun. But Fats struck his wrist. Then Nevada saw it was too late.

"That's right, Fat Face!" approved the hard, dry voice.

Nevada squinted up at a man's head and face just showing over the barrel of a rifle that had him and Fats covered. The man with the rifle had a thick black beard. He had a long, blue mark that came down the middle of his forehead onto his crooked nose. The blue mark had probably been made by a bullet. The mark was grim evidence that Nevada and Fats were face to face with the notorious outlaw killer and claim jumper, Blue Scar himself!

The scar and the crooked nose made Blue Scar's black, beady eyes look smaller than they really were. Nevada heard Fats talking fast, in a low tone.

"Don't answer no questions, Nevada," Fats was saying. "We'll keep our

hides whole just as long as they don't know where our rock samples come from. Act dumb, Nevada. It'll be natural for you."

A MINUTE later the pardners were being herded out of the arroyo. Half a dozen mounted hombres surrounded them. Blue Scar had used his head. Instead of trailing them, he had taken a short-cut and headed them off, where he must have figured they would make a break for the malpais.

Disarmed, Fats and Nevada stood with a pair of Blue Scar's killers beside them. Blue Scar and four other hombres were looking at the rich rock samples they had taken from the burro packs. Blue Scar walked over, and what he said proved that Fats had been smart.

"All right, pilgrims!" said Blue Scar. "You hombres have a strike somewhere not far off. You lead us to it, an' we'll leave yuh grub an' a chance to cross the desert to Paint Rock."

Fats saw Nevada start to open his swollen mouth. That was bad. Nevada's mind probably was clogged up again. Probably, Nevada would swallow Blue Scar's phony promise.

"Sure 'nough, Blue Scar?" cut in Fats, his wide, blue eyes betraying nothing. "An' soon as we showed you the strike, we'd be dead meat. You ain't leavin' us or nobody else ride off to Paint Rock to be bringin' the law down onto yuh."

A hard grin cut through Blue Scar's black beard.

"Smart maverick, ain'tcha?" said the outlaw. "Figurin' that same way, yuh're probably thinkin' yuh're due to be lead poisoned anyway, so you'll keep yore trap shut, huh?"

Fats grinned a little.

"That's about the size o' it, ain't it, Blue Scar?" he said cheerfully. "Whether me'n my pard palaver or keep our tongues looped up, we'd wind up as buzzard bait. So Nevada an' me'll have to play the cards as they've been dealt. Nope, mister, we ain't talkin' none."

The grin left Blue Scar's face. His mean, beady eyes glittered. Then the grin came back into his beard. But it was harder this time. He chuckled deep in his throat.

"Landy!" he said, turning to one of his men. "You an' Murt see what yuh can figure out might untie a couple of tight tongues!"

Two of the men moved toward Fats and Nevada menacingly. Nevada had by this time quit trying to think, so he accepted Fats' point of view that they would die whether or not they told Blue Scar the location of their rich claim. Nevada's face and ears had by this time begun to suggest that he had collided with a nest of mad hornets.

One of the men moving toward the pardners at Blue Scar's order, was carrying a coil of light rope. This hombre looked from Fats to Nevada then back to one of the broncs. Fats had a mental picture of Nevada and himself being ankle-dragged at the heels of the bronc.

Fats spoke out of the corner of his mouth to Nevada.

"If they take me first, Nevada, you keep yore lip buttoned up. They'll get yuh anyway, an' I wouldn't want to pass out thinkin' they'd make yuh talk and get our claim."

But Blue Scar ended Fats' speech abruptly. The outlaw stepped forward. He flicked one hairy hand toward a small patch of weeds in the nearby rocks. A round, slender barrel cactus pointed its spiny length upward from among the weeds.

"So, you're a smart maverick?" sneered Blue Scar, looking at Fats. "You're thinkin' we're finishin' yuh off one at a time, so the other would loosen his gullet. Yuh've got another guess comin'. Landy! Murt! Rip off their shirts an' their flannels down to the hide."

FATS had caught Blue Scar's glance at the barrel cactus among the scanty weeds. Even then he tried to keep his grin, but it faded almost as soon as the blistering sun got in its first licks upon his bare skin.

"What are they meanin' to do?" grunted Nevada.

Fats didn't have to reply. Four of Blue Scar's men seized them roughly. Less than one minute later, the pard-

ners, stripped down to their belts, were seated back to back. A dozen or more loops of the light rope was whipped around them, and a hitch made, whereby a quick pull by Blue Scar himself drew the pardners much closer together.

It wasn't being drawn together that brought an oath ripping from Nevada's swollen lips, and caused Fats to lose his grin and to grit his teeth viciously to repress a groan. The reason was that the slender, spiny barrel cactus was between the pardners' backs.

The first bite of the hundreds of sharp spikes into his hide caused Nevada to make a desperate lunge to free himself from the torture. But when he did that, he only pulled Fats more solidly into the burning spines.

"You locoed fool, Nevada!" snapped Fats, and heaved his own weight, which brought Nevada right back where he had been.

"Havin' fun, hombres?" Blue Scar grinned evilly, looking down at them. "I'm thinkin' me an' the boys'll be havin' some chuck an' be slakin' our thirst at the spring over yonder. You can be thinkin' it over about tellin' me the location o' that claim."

Nevada Jones was suffering to the limit of his endurance. Even his unusual stock of profanity had run dry, and his tongue had become so swollen that he couldn't swear audibly anyway. All he could do was to try to endure it in silence, and Nevada never had enough thoughts to keep him busy that way.

Through one scarcely opened eye he saw Blue Scar and seven outlaw killers breaking out jerky and washing it down with copious draughts of water from the rock spring only a few yards away. Nevada guessed the Utah sun must be breaking all records, and was now three shades hotter than the hinges of Hades.

Neither he nor Fats moved. And the way the fat-bodied Fats was sagged down, Nevada wondered if he had passed out. Nevada wished he could pass out, too. Between the furnacelike sun in the mid-day copper of the Utah sky, a thirst that was choking him, the nettle sting that was smarting his face and the barrel cactus that formed the only resting place for his back, life had become very complicated for Nevada.

"Dagnation!" he muttered deep in his throat. "I'm gonna tell them coyotes where the claim is staked, an' get us drilled quick. Yep. That's what I'm gonna do."

Low as his voice was, the apparently unconscious Fats heard it.

"Shore, yuh spooked tumbleweed," Fats raged. "G'wan an' tell 'em, an' they'll be leavin' us tied here sunnin' ourselves while they take a five mile sashay an' maybe miss the claim. What'll we be doin' in the meantime?"

Nevada choked when he tried to talk again. He wished sometimes that his pardner wasn't so smart. Fats always thought of too many things that kept Nevada from getting them out of ruckuses like this one. Or so Nevada thought.

BLUE SCAR came over then, a waterbag spilling cool liquid over the rocks. The rocks were so hot that the water sizzled. Nevada took a long

(Continued on page 108)

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JAIL BREAK

By SAM BRANT

Author of "The Nickel Gun," "Ranger in Trouble," etc.

Buck Hardy, Red-Headed Young Sheriff, Jumps a Murder Charge to Clean Up a Bank Robbery!

Sheriff Hardy

THE atmosphere in the Last Chance was tense. Two men faced each other before the bar. The patrons moved hastily away. Since the Festival Bank was robbed, two days ago, everybody waited for the showdown between Jeff Lake, owner of the Bar X spread, and Buck Hardy, the red-headed young sheriff. A shipment of cash was expected by sundown, and many tensely expected another robbery.

"I'm warnin' yuh, Lake," Hardy snapped. "Yuh been talkin' about how I happen to be out of town when things break 'round here."

"Yes, I said it," growled Lake. "Where was yuh when the bank was robbed? Mebbe yuh'll be gone again come evenin'. . . ."

Hardy leaped forward abruptly, smashed a hard fist against the big man's mouth, sent Lake reeling back. The ranch owner sprawled awkwardly on the rough floor.

Hardy waited for the big man to get to his feet. He caught the sardonic expression of the gaunt jasper who leaned against the end of the bar. Hardy wondered why Sam Black appeared amused.

Lake got to his feet sullenly. Apparently he had temporarily had all the fighting he wanted.

"You ain't heard the last of this," he growled. "I'll get yuh the next time, Hardy—an' I'll come a-shootin'!"

"Suits me!" said Hardy. "Yuh called the next hand."

Sheriff Hardy was thinking swiftly as he tramped along the boardwalk. Sam Black puzzled him, the man had been in Festival a week hanging around the saloon.

The sheriff caught a glimpse of a slender figure on a bay horse. It was a pretty, brown-haired girl.

"Buck!" she called out. "I hoped I'd find you."

The young sheriff's heart leaped. Sue Ware meant the world to him. But of late she had been seen quite a bit with Jeff Lake.

"Shore glad to see yuh, Sue," he said as she reined her mount.

"Will you come to the ranch for supper tomorrow night?" she asked.

"Shore. I'll be glad to, thanks."

Sue smiled and rode on. Hardy went on to saddle his horse and rode out of town. He was still looking for the bank robbers, hoping to cut some sign where the trail faded.

After hours of futile search he returned and rode slowly into town.

"There's the sneaking hombre who shot Jeff Lake in the back!" a voice shouted.

Hardy whirled in the direction of

the voice. It was Tim Patterson, foreman of the Bar X outfit. The gathering crowd uttered an angry roar.

"What's all this about?" Hardy demanded angrily.

"Yuh killed Lake," said Patterson. "Said you was gonna do it in the saloon."

Rough hands grabbed him. In a moment the crowd was leading him toward the jail. Inside, they drew the keys out of his pocket. Hardy glimpsed Sam Black. The man brushed against him. The sheriff felt a rough file suddenly thrust up his shirt sleeve as they rushed him into the cell and locked it.

IN a few minutes, the crowd departed and Hardy pulled the file out of his sleeve. Why had Sam Black done this?

He had cut halfway through one of the cell window bars when, out of the dusk, he heard a voice calling.

He saw Sue Ware just outside, her horse beside her.

"Buck," she called. "Here, take this." She handed him her gun. "I have to get you out of here, quick!"

"I've got an idea," said Sue.

As she unfastened her rope from the saddle and looped it around the two bars, a shot roared from somewhere nearby. Hardy ducked as a bullet sped by his head. The gun in his hand flamed as he aimed at a figure ducking around the corner of a building. There was a howl of pain, and the figure disappeared.

Sue had swung into the saddle. The other end of the rope was fastened to the saddle-horn. As the rope drew tight, the bars began to give, and then pulled out of the brick and mortar.

Hardy hurriedly climbed out the window. He ran toward the girl, swinging up behind her.

In the distance, they could hear the roar of the mob, attracted by the sound of the shots. Then, at a break-neck pace, they headed their mount for the road where the stage would come with the bank money.

Hardy uttered a curse as he saw the stage drawn up beside the road. One of the lead horses was dead and

(Concluded on page 113)

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EXCITING COMICS

HIYA, gals and galluses! Injuns! Time was when that was a trouble yell in ol' Texas. But nowadays, as you folks know, there's no more of 'em in the Ranger State.

But Indians, they played a big part in Texas frontier history. So in order to savvy those stirring times, it's helpful to study up on the red man and his own history.

Where the first Americans came from and when, no man can say for certain. But by piecing together scattered facts, it's now calculated that 846,000 Indians roamed over what is now the United States when the white man first came, four and one-half centuries ago.

Bloody Centuries

Four of those centuries were bloody ones. Not until the late '80s was the last Indian war fought. That was the Apache outbreak in southern Arizona under Geronimo.

In 1900, the census showed that the aboriginal population of this country had dwindled from that original 846,000 to 270,000. "The dying race," Indians was called.

But the Indian population got a new grabhold on existence in the next decade. It kept on increasing until the 1940 census showed 361,816. Not only are the Indians increasing in numbers, but they're getting important economically. In 24 States the 200 tribes have 55 million acres of land. They're on the march to complete self-supporting status.

One mighty interesting fact in connection with Indian study is that in aboriginal days, they were distributed in just about the same proportion as the white population is today.

Along the Atlantic seaboard, that was where they lived the thickest—about 8 to the mile. On the Great Plains, the migratory tribes tallied about 3 to the mile. California, 5 to the mile.

Mexican Indians

Those figures are the guesswork of guv'ment officials and scientists, lumped together. Though it's allowed this don't tell the whole story. The lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas was a right populous Indian country. A good indication of that is, out of Mexico's present population of around 40 million, 16 million are Indians. Mexico has more Indians than Canada has total population—about 12 million.

Oklahoma has the most Indians. Arizona is next, with one-sixth of the latter state's area being reservations. The Texas Indians got transplanted into Oklahoma when it was called Indian Territory. Fact is, the Territory was created mainly to settle the Texas Indian problem, which caused the Rangers to be organized.

He's One of Us

What part the Indian will play in the destiny of our country no man can foretell. He's one of us, now. In the World War, more than 12,000 enlisted—and were made full-fledged citizens by Act of Congress. They made crack soldiers. The Comanches, once the scourge of Texas, performed a specially valuable service.

They went into the Signal Corps, and were used to telephone orders and despatches at the Front and in back of the lines.

The enemy naturally tapped these communication lines. They heard a outlandish gibberish. They put all the decoding experts of Europe on the job. They mighty near went loco, trying to figure out that strange "code."

Just Plain Comanche

It was just plain Comanche confab. The Comanche dialect, which never has been made into a written language, was never broken down, like all of the other most complicated secret codes!

In the present emergency, a flock of young Comanches who speak the old tongue, and fluent English as well, are being trained for the same job. The Indians, once savage enemies, are now among our first-line defenders.

Indian affairs, long neglected, and governed by laws long out of date, started to get a good working over when President Roosevelt took office. He was strong for helping Indians to help themselves, and in urging adoption of the 1934 reorganization act the President said:

"Certainly the continuance of autocratic rule by a federal department . . . is incompatible with American ideals of liberty. It is also destructive of the character and self-respect of a great race."

John Collier's Policy

John Collier, who had hollered a long time for Indian reform, was made Indian Commissioner. He gave his policy as follows:

1.—To make the Indian self-supporting by restoring lands and providing credit and training to that end.

2.—To settle tribal claims against the government.

3.—To establish civil liberty.

4.—To conserve natural resources on Indian lands.

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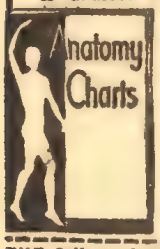

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5.—To protect Indian ceremonial customs and encourage native arts and crafts.

6.—To make the Indian self-governing.

Well now, gals and galluses, since John Collier laid down that program I've visited Indian lands, from the Seminoles of Florida and the Cherokees of the Great Smokies, to the Sioux, Blackfoot and Klamath countries in our Northwest. And on down through Piute and Shoshone areas to Navajo land, onto the Apache reservations and to the big Papago bailiwick on the Mexican border.

I reckon I've seen about as many different tribes and clans as a lot of field men in the Indian Service. And folks, I'm here to tell you that in every one of those six points except one, Uncle Sam is making good in a big way.

I'm going to tell you right soon what that one point is. It happens that the states are at fault, not the federal guv'ment.

The Black Hills

One of the big things accomplished was settling the old claim of the Sioux to the Black Hills, South Dakota. The shameful violation of the treaty under which the Black Hills was given in "perpetuity" to the Sioux was what actually brung about the Custer massacre on the Little Big Horn. It was thisaway: After making the Black Hills Indian land, white men found gold there. They drove out the Sioux.

The Sioux made war, along with their allies, the Cheyennes and Arapahoes. Custer went out to round 'em up. You know the rest.

Most folks think that Indians of today survive on pensions, gifts and issue of rations. That procedure has gone pretty much into the discard since Collier took hold.

Easy Prey

There was a time when Indians were drove onto barren lands and told to farm it and get along. The theory didn't work. The Indian became easy prey to exploiters. The allotment policy has now been reversed. No more can a white sharper become a millionaire by swapping some redman an ax or a blanket for rich oil lands, like they did in Oklahoma.

Today, title to Indian lands is in most cases held in trust by the United States guv'ment. It assesses no taxes. It sends experts to show the Indian how to make the most of his lands. It builds dams, schools, hospitals and shops. Many of the 8412 jobs in the Indian Bureau are held now by Indians. In the past seven years, the Indian income from cattle sales has climbed—1000 percent!

What's more, to the surprise of the white man administrators, the Indians have shown keen business ability. Exploiting an Indian is a tough proposition nowadays. He can beat a lot of white men at their own game of business.

Many tribes have written their own law-and-order codes since 1934. They have

their own judges and police. State courts have no jurisdiction on a reservation. Federal courts handle only cases arising from 10 major crimes. The rest the Indians settle in their own way.

Good Organizers

The Indians are good business organizers. The Navajos are outstanding people in this respect. They're creating their own trade channels and establishing their own buying co-operatives. A smaller tribe, the Chimayos of northern New Mexico, are giving the Navajos a run in blanket-making. And they're turning their weaving to production of high-class articles of clothing as well.

The Pueblo tribes are making pottery that ranks high in world output of beautiful earthenware. Silver craft and jewelry, patterned on their own ancient design, is a fast-growing business with the Hopis and Zunis.

This is just a small part of the story. By getting out and pitching with the white man in his own world, the Indian has shown his race has the elements of greatness. We've had an Indian vice-president.

We've had notable and beloved figures like Will Rogers, who had a strong Indian strain in their ancestry. Not many years ago, pioneer western families tried to cover up the fact of part Indian blood. It's fashionable now to brag of it! One of the greatest athletes of all time, Jim Thorpe, was 100 percent Indian.

Who can say what future great men are today little barefoot Indian boys whose grandkin lived in hogans, tepees, wickiups or wigwams?

The 24 Indian States

In the past eight years 4 million acres have been added to Indian lands. These lands, as I remarked, aren't all out West. The 24 "Indian" states include New York, Michigan and Wisconsin. The rest are:

Oklahoma, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

Now here's something a lot of folks wonder about. Does all this advance mean that the Indian is losing his picturesque ways of life?

Freedom of Worship

No, not necessarily, he isn't. A good many tribes have found out that it's good business to keep on looking like Indians. The guv'ment has encouraged this in one way. It permits complete freedom of worship.

The Indians of the Southwest still have their Snake Dance, the Sun Dance and Corn Festival, and many other ceremonials, some of them seldom witnessed by white men. The only exception I know of is that the Sioux Sun Dance isn't permitted, not in the way it was originally performed. A good

[*Turn page*]

To People who want to write *but can't get started*

Do you have that constant urge to write but the fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what Fulton Oursler, editor of Liberty, has to say on the subject:

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"I had no job, no chance of getting one. I have always had the desire to write. I saw your ad, borrowed the money to pay for the course. Before finishing your course I had become self-supporting as a correspondent for the state papers. I believe that if anyone wants to be a writer and will apply himself to your course, he will soon know whether his living is coming out of the writing market."
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50 years ago, the Sioux were ordered to drop the physical ordeal part of it. The part where the young bucks dance with thongs laced through the shoulder muscles. In which they danced until the thong broke. Or the performer flopped.

They still do the Sun Dance but have eliminated the barbaric part.

Pity the Poor Census Taker!

A census count of the Indians was a big-sized job, specially in the nation of the Navajo, where many tribesmen live so far back in the wild, desert plateau country that a nose-count needed hombres like Kit Carson.

Some of you Frontier Post gals and galluses will rejoice to know that there is a wilderness left, lots of it, in some parts of the country. There's ruins of prehistoric pueblos that have never been mapped or even photographed in southern Utah and northern Arizona. More than likely there's more of the same in our own Texas, in the gorge of the Rio Grande, down in the Big Bend country.

And now I reckon you're gettin' set to ask, what is the one Indian policy which hasn't been made good on?

The Voting Problem

It's the one that provides for suffrage. In some States, the reservation Indian doesn't vote, though that right has been guaranteed him by the Great White Father. They don't just up and tell him no. But the states in question, they neglect to provide voting precincts. And they don't furnish polling places and election officers.

You can't vote if there's no place to vote.

It'll all come about in time. It's time that has brought about this encouraging solution to Indian troubles. A solution that was never reached in pioneer times through fighting. Onto which I reckon we can tie a moral, if we see it thataway. Which is, war doesn't ever really settle any problem, except to save a man's scalp for the time being. Which in some cases is important.

Adios! —CAPTAIN STARR.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

HAPPY VALLEY was a gem in the vast Lone Star state. It was narrowed and deep, hemmed in by gigantic grey rock cliffs that were breath-taking in height and unscalable save at certain points where erosion had broken them down. For most of its length, Happy Valley was really a canyon—and it was a place rich in natural resources.

Suddenly the people of Happy Valley,

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TEXAS RANGERS

EVERY ISSUE

living in peace and contentment, become buzzard bait! In the wake of new mineral discoveries, tragedy stalks! Vicious despoilers visit Happy Valley, spreading hate and havoc—and the name of this colorful canyon becomes ironical, indeed.

Then—Jim Hatfield is sent to Happy Valley to straighten out matters—and he finds it necessary to "straighten out" a few gents who are trying to kill every live thing in the valley. The whole story's told in next issue's featured novel—OUTLAW VALLEY, by Jackson Cole. You'll read on with pulses pounding as Hatfield battles against fierce odds in his determination to clean up this section of the country.

OUTLAW VALLEY is a real epic of the West—redolent with sagebrush, shot through with the acrid tang of gunsmoke. Thrill follows thrill in rapid-fire procession as the unsuspected depths of a vast conspiracy are brought to light by the keen wits and observant eyes of Jim Hatfield.

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BRAINS VERSUS BULLETS

(Continued from page 100)

breath and felt better. Anyway, the outlaw killer was going to give them a drink.

"Recollected the whereabouts o' that claim yet?" said Blue Scar tauntingly. "Maybe a taste o' this would freshen up yore think tanks."

The outlaw stood there, his bowed legs spread wide apart. He grinned in his beard as he slowly permitted the water to run from the neck of the canvas waterbag.

In spite of his swollen tongue and parched throat, Nevada forced out a few oaths that were hotter than the rocks, then he shut up.

"Take yore time, pilgrims," Blue Scar said. "We ain't figgerin' on ridin' until the sun gets lower. By that time—"

The outlaw shrugged meaningly, and went back to his men. Nevada twisted his tortured body far enough to see Fats over one shoulder. Fats seemed to be out again. His round head was slumped forward. Then Nevada noticed that Fats had worked one hand below the rope around his arms.

"Yep," mumbled Nevada. "He's crazy, shore as sin. Damned if he ain't tryin' to eat weeds."

Nevada's neck ached as he watched, but he saw Fats stick his hand into fuzzy-leaved, grayish weed close to his leg. Then Fats pulled a handful of it and, so far as Nevada could see, he was bending his head down to eat the stuff.

"He'll pizen himself," muttered Nevada, and he tried to make Fats hear him again.

But if his pardner was aware of his mumbling, Fats paid no attention to him. All Nevada could see was that Fats was rubbing his face back and forward over the handful of weed. Nevada tried desperately to puzzle it out.

Blue Scar and his men, having filled up on grub and water, were stretched out in the shade of the rocks, taking it easy. Nevada's thoughts would have blasted them to perdition, if he could have put them into practice.

Suddenly, Nevada felt Fats strain suddenly against the ropes binding them, and he was jammed abruptly back into the barrel cactus spines. A choked grunt of agony was forced from

his throat. Then Nevada heard Fats let out a croaking, hoarse yell.

"I got it! I got it! I knowed I'd get it!"

Fats' husky cry brought Blue Scar and his men hurriedly to their feet. As they came running, Fats started yelling again.

"Keep off, blast yuh!" he shrieked. "You'll get it, too! My pard had it this morning, an' now it's me!"

"Got what, yuh spooked maverick?" demanded Blue Scar's cold voice. "What in blazes?" He was looking closer at Fats' face.

"The black plague—the plague!" screamed Fats. "Keep away from me! I wasn't shore my pard had it this morning, but now it's breakin' out all over me! I'm burnin' up! Everyone o' you that touched us is gonna get it!"

NEVADA heard Blue Scar rap out an order.

"Get back, you hombres! Shore 'nough! The ranny's all busted out with that same stuff was on the other jasper's face! The black plague! It's smallpox, men! Keep away from 'em!"

"Water! Water!" screamed Fats. "Landy an' Murt, and you too, Blue Scar, bring me water! You handled us, so's you'll get it anyway!"

Even Nevada's slow brain began to get the drift of Fats' sudden attack, although he could not quite figure out why the three outlaws he could see near by were staring so hard at Fats. But Blue Scar and the others could see that Fats' face and the front part of his body was all broken out with red and swelling welts. Fats' eyes were fast closing, and his lips were turning black. But the last might have been the result of the thirst and heat Fats had been enduring.

Nevada could hear the outlaws muttering.

"Landy! Murt!" snapped Blue Scar. "You keep away from the others. Maybe the ranny'll tell us now where his claim is located. Smallpox ain't anything to fool with at this altitude. Nobody ever gets well."

Nevada heard more mutterings. One of the outlaws he could see was saying to another one:

"It ain't only Landy and Murt that'll get it. The chief himself—"

[*Turn page*]

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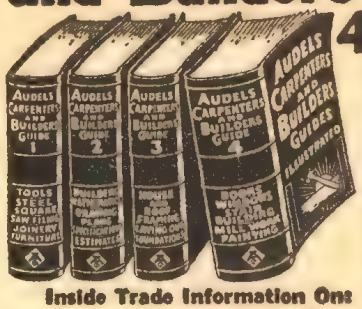

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"Shut up!" snapped the other outlaw. "Maybe we can get to the nags. An' we better stampede the others to keep them from trailin' us. I ain't wantin'—"

The pair started moving out of Nevada's ear range.

Nevada's mind was all stuffed up again. Smallpox? What had come over Fats? Saying that he, Nevada, had it. That didn't make any sense.

Fats was moaning now, apparently in pathetic fear. And the next words he uttered made less sense to Nevada's one-track mind.

"I knowed we shoulda stayed away from old Jim Decker," was Fats' hollow moan. "He had the plague, an' we went an' had grub with him last night."

"Old Jim Decker had it, the smallpox?" Blue Scar gulped out. "You, Jenks and Baldy! You was the ones who put his carcass in the creek. You get over with Landy an' Murt! By hell! Claim or no claim, the rest of us are ridin'. And we're takin' all the nags, just in case you hombres that might have come down with it think you'll join up with us!"

"Yeah?" snarled a deep, hard voice. "No, yuh don't, Blue Scar. We ain't havin' any of that. You was the hombre that carried old Jim Decker to the creek yourself. An' you—"

"Water! For God's sake, some one give me water!" Fats yelled. "You all got it! It don't make no difference who—"

One of the outlaws must have made a break for the horses, for Nevada heard a .45 explode. He heard Blue Scar's dry, hard voice.

"And any of the rest of yuh that wants to get ventilated, try and make the same move!"

But another pair of the outlaws apparently were starting for their horses. Then Nevada saw Blue Scar and two other killers running toward the rocks. Several guns were blasting now. One of the fleeing killers stumbled, turned around, and went down with a startled look in his eyes. He did not get up.

BLUE SCAR turned, dropped suddenly to one knee. There was the sound of a horse starting to gallop away. Nevada couldn't see what was

going on. Blue Scar aimed his .45, and let go with three shots. A horse screamed, and went crashing down.

The other killer who was with Blue Scar up by the rocks triggered a rifle, and another running horse smashed to earth. Nevada heard Fats behind him muttering something through gritted teeth. It sounded to Nevada like he was saying:

"If any of 'em are left alive, it'll be just too bad for us."

It was at this moment that Blue Scar sprang up and started to run again. Nevada twisted his agonized neck far enough to see that Blue Scar was making for his own staked-out horse. An incredible thing happened then.

The killer in the rocks behind Blue Scar deliberately raised his Winchester and pulled trigger. It was Blue Scar now who turned slowly upon his feet, looking back as if he could not believe he had been shot through the spine. Then he went down abruptly, and lay very still.

The killer who had got Blue Scar darted suddenly from the rocks. All other shooting and sound had died out. Nevada saw the killer halt, and turn his snarling face toward the pardners tied to the barrel cactus. Then the killer slowly lifted his Winchester and ejected a spent shell.

Nevada tried to cry out. He did not hear Fats say anything. It seemed to be the killer's intention to finish off the prisoners rather than leave them to die of thirst and heat. As the rifle appeared to be aimed directly at his head, Nevada instinctively ducked as the trigger was pulled.

He was waiting to feel the lead plow into his flesh. But no bullet came. There was no explosion. There was a metallic click only.

"Empty!" shouted the killer. "Well, both of yuh stay there an' rot! It won't be long until the buzzards are pecking out your eyes."

Still holding the empty rifle, the killer went on. Nevada saw him fork the horse on which Blue Scar had intended to make his getaway. There was silence for a minute after the pounding sound of galloping hoofs died away.

Then Nevada heard Fats speak.

"I hate like sin to do it, pard," he

(Turn page)

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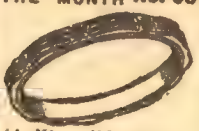

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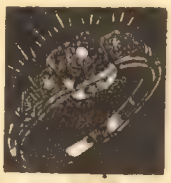

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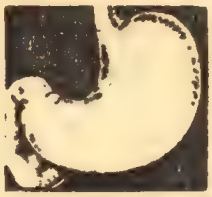

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said, "but it's either you or me—"

Nevada felt the cactus spines bite deep into his bare back. The ropes tightened around his body, and he was clamped solidly against the slender barrel cactus. A hoarse oath of rage squawked in his dry throat.

Nevada felt himself, slender barrel cactus and all, being lifted high into the air. Fats, round-bodied as he was, had muscles like steel. And he was getting the cactus spines in his own back, too, as he strained forward.

The barrel cactus came out suddenly by the roots.

"Now try crawlin', Nevada, until I get a knife off'n one of them misguided owlhooters," said Fats.

It was tough going, but they made it. . . .

Nevada sat glaring at Fats out of a partially opened eye. Fats grinned back at him, looking out of eyes that were almost as nearly closed.

"Dangnation an' barrel snakes!" exploded Nevada. "I thought yuh was eatin' pizen weed, or maybe loco plant. You'd think some of them dead killers woulda thought of it."

"Nope," said Fats. "Get an hombre scared enough, and he don't stop to think. Especially when I rung in that stuff about us gettin' smallpox from old Jim Decker. They hadn't paid much attention to the way yuh was swole up, until I got the same dose."

They got up and walked stiffly to their horses.

"Now, by heck!" exclaimed Fats. "I gotta find somethin' that'll cure this blame stingin' Utah nettle I rubbed all over me. We'll have to hole up here until we can see again."

Nevada looked disgustedly at several dead outlaws.

Small birdlike shapes were circling high in the sky.

"An' they went an' killed themselves, an' we don't even have to bury 'em," said Nevada.

"They shore are buzzard bait now," Fats said, looking at the vultures above.

Read

TEXAS RANGERS

Every Issue

JAIL BREAK

(Concluded from page 102)

the other three were running away. The stage guard was sprawled face downward on top of the coach. The driver dropped to the ground as a masked horseman fired at him.

The six-gun in the sheriff's hand barked. A masked rider went down. The other two swung their mounts around. Again Hardy fired. An outlaw swayed and then slid out of the saddle as Hardy's gun accounted for the third.

Hardy and the girl heard a galloping horse approaching. It was Jeff Lake, and he was swaying weakly in the saddle. He had almost reached them when his horse stumbled and the owner of the Bar X slid to the ground.

"Sam Black," Lake murmured. "Shot me in the back. My boys thought you did it, Hardy, when they found me unconscious. I came to—heard they was gonna lynch yuh—couldn't let that happen . . ." He stopped talking suddenly, and his mouth dropped open. He was dead.

From the direction of town came the pounding of hoofs. A quick glance told the townsmen what had happened. One of them nodded as Sue related what Jeff Lake had said.

"Reckon that's the truth," he said. "We found Sam Black's body outside the jail. There was a note in his pocket. He was the leader of the bandits. He planned to kill Lake and blame the sheriff. Wanted to get us excited so we would try to lynch Hardy and forget about Black's men robbing the stage."

"He gave me that file so that the mob would see me tryin' to break jail and be sure I was guilty," said Hardy. "Reckon when he saw Sue helpin' me he tried to kill me."

"Poor Jeff," said Sue. "Guess he acted the way he did because he was jealous of you."

Hardy glanced at her. "You figger he had reason to be jealous of me?"

"I reckon maybe he did," she said.

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